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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, as well as *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, by Scott McCloud. 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.

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 choose what the writer chose.

- 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 re reading 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 perceptually disabled person wants to 'see' this too.



There are comics out there that put visual clues within the panels that foreshadow to 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
 - Only describe the details of a scene or character if it is a new scene or 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.



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.

Scene/Object Description

- When describing panel start big and the go small.
 - Start with the Big Picture: where we are, the time of day (if it has changed from the previous panel), etc.
- 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,
 - See overview descriptions for more details.
- 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, avoid generalities and give 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, and therefore including color 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 color, 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

- When describing characters include skin color with white people as well as POC. Please avoid comparing skin colour to a food or beverage. The following is a list of suggestions.
 - Terms for describing skin colour:
 - brown

- dark brown
 - fair complexion
 - light brown
 - light tan
 - olive
 - pale pink
 - ruddy complexion
 - tan
 - white
- You only have describe a character once, and just the key physical descriptions.



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

- 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.



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

- Under construction

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