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PLOTTING STRATEGIES

One of the more common problems with creating a webcomic is figuring out the story. Without a story idea, there can't be much of a comic, so plotting is a good first step.

Most people have an idea to start with. If you don't, you can always try brainstorming for one. Write down any ideas you have about characters, settings, and potential conflicts that could form the start of your story. Most stories begin with a problem of sorts, and end with a solution. You could also experiment with comics as a way to simply explain your characters and their world. It's your story! You can do whatever you want.

If you have an idea already, you might be having difficulty figuring out how it goes from start to finish. Some people have more luck with starting at the beginning and writing all the way through to the end. For others, it can be helpful to write down the only beginning and end, and then figure out what has to happen between those two points to make the end a logical conclusion of the beginning.

If you're easily overwhelmed by details, it can help to write out the very basics of a plot and then build it up later. Just writing a sentence or two about what happens each chapter can be enough to get the overall story figured out.

Webcomic Construction

Starting with the basics can also save a lot of trouble if you find you need to revise your plot. It's easier to rewrite a few sentences than it is to have to redo paragraphs or pages of written work! Once you know how the story basically goes from the beginning to the end, you can start focusing on more detailed actions that happen in the story. You might even be ready to start working on a script (covered in more detail on page 8).

Don't be afraid to go through a few drafts of your story's plot. As you work through the plot, you might find that some things don't fit in, or maybe the pacing is too fast or slow for your liking. You might also come up with some really cool ideas while you're plotting that you want to work in! Rewriting might seem like a pain, but it might save you more frustration later. Being unsure about your plot while you're writing the plot itself can be less stressful than being unsure of your plot when you're a few hundred pages into a comic!

Instead of deleting or throwing away your plot ideas and totally rewriting them, you can always save old versions to refer to later. A good idea that didn't work in one story might be great for something else later on. Recycling unused ideas for stories, characters, and settings can be a great way to springboard future stories, or even spinoffs of the plot you're currently working on.

BASIC CONSTRUCTION

Comics of any format, length, or genre require at least a small degree of planning. It helps to know what kind of webcomic you want.

There are no rules for making webcomics. You can try anything you can imagine, even something you haven't seen before! Many comics look like classic comic strips or comic book pages, but there are a lot of comics that try other formats, shapes, sizes, and update schedules.

Consider your favorite comics. What do you like best about them? Story content aside, are some easier to read than others? Is the shape and size easy to look at and view in your web browser? Do the panels flow in a logical way that makes the action clear to understand? How is the update schedule, and what do you think it takes for the artist to produce the comic on that schedule?

If you're not sure what you want to do, it can help to start with short practice comics. Practicing different styles of comics on smaller stories and less developed ideas can help you determine what kind of comics you like making the most. It could also give you some idea of what techniques and styles might work best when you get started on your favorite story.

Webcomic Construction



“Typical” comic page



Comic strip



Sequential panels

SIZE AND FORMAT

Sizing webcomics can be tricky. Since they're usually displayed online, they can be just about any size you want. If you never plan to have your comic in print, you probably don't need to worry much about this. However, if there's any chance you want a webcomic printed in the future, you may want to format it in a way that is conducive to printing.

An important factor to consider is **size and shape**. Again, if you only plan to have your comic online, this won't be a problem. But if you want to have something printed, you may want to research printers and find out what sizes of pages they're able to do, or if they're willing to work with a custom size that you come up with. Some printers, especially online services, may work with only specific pre-determined sizes. Knowing the approximate size and dimensions of your comic will be important when you get to planning and drawing.

Preferred **color modes** also vary by printer. Some prefer CMYK (cyan, magenta, yellow, and black) and some printers prefer RGB (red, green, and blue). You may also opt for a grayscale comic. When searching for printing services, check what color modes they might require, if you want to avoid converting the color modes later on.

Webcomic Construction

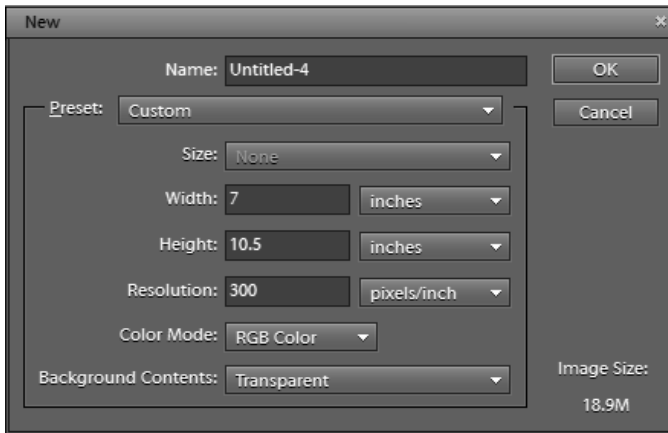


Image resolution is something to keep in mind if you want to have comics printed. A low-res (small) image can result in blurry or pixelated prints, and it could make your comic harder to read and less nice to look at. Some people think it can help to simply size up images so they're larger, but the process of enlarging images can also result in significant blurriness! It helps to create a large image in the first place, so plan ahead and consider what size you might want your comic to be if it were printed out and in your hands.

300 DPI (with 300 pixels corresponding to one inch of printed image) is often considered a good resolution for print. 300 DPI means an 8.5 by 11 inch paper would end up being 2550 by 3300 pixels. That's pretty big for the web. When you draw and finish your comic pages, however, you can probably save both a large full-resolution version and a smaller web-sized version.

Webcomic Construction

Print margins are another thing to plan for.

The *full bleed size* is the size a printing service wants your image files to be so they can print.

The *trim size* is the size your comic will be after it is printed and trimmed down. This is about actual size for your printed comic.

Important stuff, such as dialogue, should be within the *safe area* (or *live area*), or else there's a chance it could get trimmed off.



Meg got the dialogue uncomfortably close to the margin.

Check with a printer to find out their specifications for these margins. It will likely depend on the size and shape of your comic. Finding this out in advance can save your time from being wasted by making revisions, and also save your comic's great content from being chopped off at the edges.

Webcomic Construction

When searching for a printer, you may want to research both online services and local printing businesses. Online printers can be convenient, but it may be harder to communicate, obtain proofs, or have your individual needs met. Local printers can often be easier to build a personal, friendly working relationship with. Always look for reviews on printing services and find out if other people have had good or bad experience with them.

If you're feeling ambitious, you might try to print your own comics instead of seeking a professional printing business. This can be a lot of work, but allow you to do things for yourself that a printing service might not be willing to try. Once again, it can be a great idea to research brands and models of printers if you choose to go this route. If you find other webcomic artists that also print their own books, ask them if they have suggestions.

SCRIPTS AND THUMBNAILS

Once you have your plot figured out, and you know the basics of how you want a webcomic to look, it can be very tempting to rush in and start working on the first page. This method can work for stand-alone strips and shorter stories. If you plan to create longer-term stories, or if you just want to play it safe, scripts and thumbnails can be of use to you. Longer stories can be more complex and more planning usually doesn't hurt.

Scripts and thumbnails can be considered an extension of the basic plot you may have already written, following the additional planning step of figuring out how you want your pages to be sized, shaped, and formatted. With scripts and thumbs, you can start with your plot and flesh out the action and dialogue page by page. It might seem like a tedious step, but it has the potential to really speed things along when you get to working on the actual pages.

Again, don't be afraid to edit! Scripts and thumbs can seem to slow things down, but it's nothing like remaking an entire comic due to poor planning or continuity errors. Rewriting sections of script and redrawing thumbnails takes only a few minutes per page, compared to (potentially) hours that go into creating finished comics pages.

Webcomic Construction

A **script** is exactly what it sounds like: consider what characters will say and what will be happening in your comic, and then begin writing it. You don't have to write it out in detail like a novel or essay, but helps to include characters' dialogue, important actions, and perhaps some information about the setting. This can be especially helpful for longer stories. Writing things down makes them easier to remember for later.

-----PAGE 2

NICO: No signs of life or undeath whatsoever. Not a soul in the facility - literally.

GUARD 2: So they're all dead.

-----PAGE 3

NICO: I'd guess so, unless they ended up somewhere else in the wasteland. It'll be hard to get approval for a search party.

-----PAGE 4

DULCIE: (examining ruins) Nico! Look at this!

NICO: I'm looking. Which apparently puts me ahead of the maintenance crew here.

-----PAGE 5

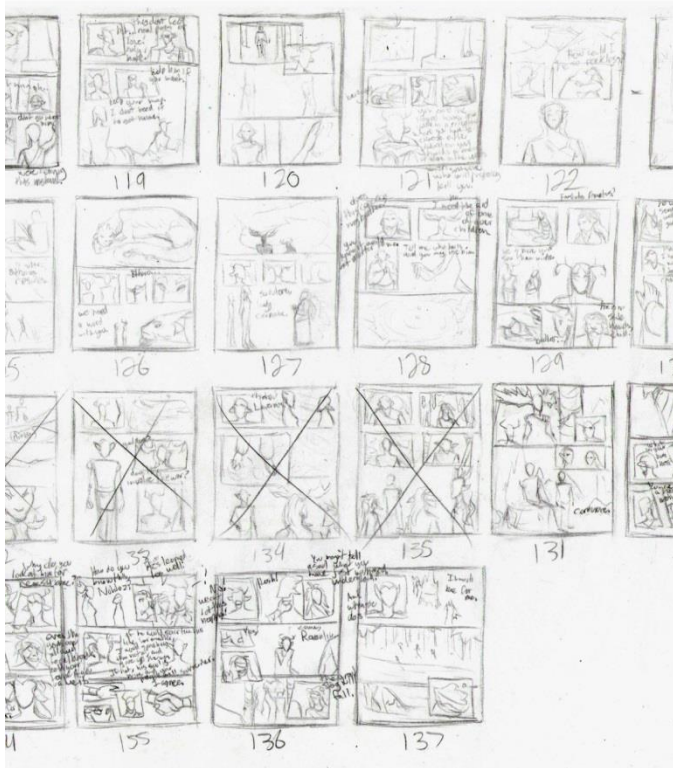
DULCIE: Look at this decay. It's been *months*.

NICO: But it could still send signals even if no one was here, right?

A section of script for smaller comic pages

Webcomic Construction

Thumbnails could be considered the next step after a script, but working on the script and thumbnails at the same time can be useful, too. Thumbnails can be a quick and easy way to decide how your pages will look without going to the work of actually drawing your pages. While working on thumbnails, it becomes easier to separate your script by page depending on how you want it paced.



A section of thumbnails. Several are crossed out and redrawn.

PAGE PRODUCTION

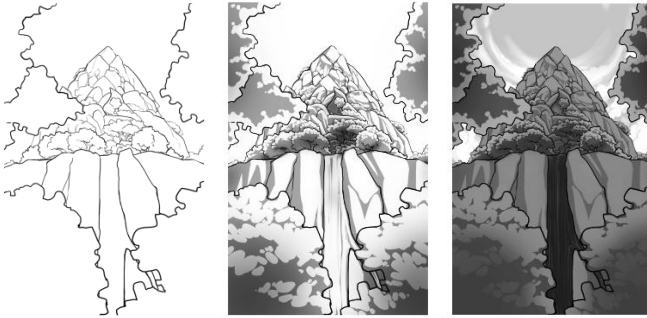
Once you know what kind of comic you're doing, whether you want it set up for print or not, and what it's going to look like based on your thumbnails and script, you're probably more than ready to actually get started.

How you create your pages will depend on your individual drawing process, preferred art medium, and personal preference. However, when faced with a few, or a dozen, or hundreds of pages (depending on how involved your comic is), it can help to break your comic-making into steps.

Consider the following:

- Think of your recent drawings, if you have any. Do you have a process? Is there a series of steps you already follow for your art? Would it work for comics as well?
- Would it be more motivating to complete one page at a time? Or would you rather finish the sketches of all your pages, then the inks on all of them, then the colors on all of them, for example?
- How much time do you want to spend on each page? Will you need to streamline your art style or your drawing process to make that work?

Webcomic Construction



There is no right way or wrong way of making comics. As mentioned earlier, practice comics can be a good idea if you're new to creating comics or if you're not sure what type and style works best for you. Creating short comics for practice is a particularly good idea if you don't have a decided method of making art, or if you want to try new ways of drawing to see how they'll work for you.

Some people choose to use their favorite or most-developed idea on their first comic. This is fine, and many such comics have been successful. Others prefer to wait until comic-making is a more routine task before starting on their favorite comic idea. The way you do this is up to you.

SCHEDULING

Some comic artists simply choose to put their comic pages online as soon as the pages are completed. Depending on what your comic page process is like, this system may work for you!

Many comics have a decided update schedule. Some strips might update daily or several times per week, and pages or panel-based comics might go up weekly or twice per week. Some updates are individual pages or strips, but sometimes comic artists can produce multi-page updates.

Readers love frequent updates, but what they love more is just knowing when to expect an update. It can be hard for some readers to keep up with a comic if it updates irregularly. If a comic updates a lot and then suddenly stops updating, readers will be disappointed and possibly concerned. If it doesn't update much at all and then suddenly starts updating, some readers might not notice - they haven't been checking!

You may want to consider producing several pages in advance before beginning to upload them. This way, you have an opportunity to figure out how much time a comic update would take you to complete. Can you finish an update once per week? Once every two weeks? Twice in a week? Every day?

Webcomic Construction

Maybe you have a lot of time on the weekends, but not on weekdays. If you want two updates spaced evenly throughout the week, you may want to plan ahead and draw two updates' worth of comics on the weekend. Likewise, if you have a lot of time this month, but you'll be busy at a convention next month, you can try to squeeze out a few extra updates' worth of comics while you have the time. This will allow you to stockpile comic updates, if you wish to maintain a consistent update schedule even while you're busy.

Depending on how long you're willing to wait before putting your comic the web, you may even find it helpful to build up several updates' worth of your comic before displaying any of it online. Starting out with a large buffer of updates can be wise. If you get interrupted shortly after putting your comic online, the updates you have stored can provide a safety net until you can get back to making your comic.

If you're able to maintain your pace of production, you can still keep several updates stored in case you can't meet your deadlines at some point in the future. Or, alternatively, you can celebrate sometime with a few bonus updates.

There are no downsides to being well ahead of your update schedule!

CONCLUSION

While this is certainly not a comprehensive guide, I hope this resource was helpful regarding the basic technical aspects of planning and creating a webcomic.

If you have questions or comments, or if you'd like to share your own webcomic, feel free to email meg-james@meg-james.com.

Happy webcomic-making!

