They are not a collection of words and images printed on the same page. (That's what illustrated books are.) To be a comic book, those words and images must work together as parts of speech work together in a normal English sentence. Think of comics as a language comprised of two separate and vastly different elements used in tandem to convey information. To be a good comics writer, you must be, or become, as fluent in this hybrid language as you are in your mother tongue.

Writing comics is a bit like writing poetry; you've got to adapt your thoughts to a fairly rigid form and use it so fluently that readers are unaware of its artificiality.

Before we discuss the words part of the words-and-pictures alliance, let's look at the basic "vocabulary" of our language—terms which apply only to comics.

Comic Book Terminology

Story page or page: One comic book page, which may be more or less than one manuscript page.

Manuscript page: Page in your script.

Splash page: Usually the first page, with one or two images, incorporating title, logo (if any), credits, other such information. Placing the splash page later in the story, on page two, three, or even four, is becoming common. It is a questionable practice because, in the minds of some readers, the story doesnt *really* start until they've read past the credits and title. Once, a long time ago, I used a lot of page two splashes. I now wish I hadn't. I did it for the sake of novelty, and that's not a sufficiently good reason. If a technique has no direct, discernible narrative benefit, question it, hard; using it might not be doing your audience any favors.

If there will be more than one story in the issue, it's a very good idea to treat the splash page as a second cover, featuring the character's name/logo, title and credits to signal the reader that he or she is into a new story. (In fact, that's almost certainly why the splash-page convention began. Once upon a time, believe it or not, *all* comics had more than one story.)

The term "splash page" is often misused when a writer really means a full-page shot.

Full-page shot: One page, one picture.

Panel: One box (which is what some older writers called it). Usually, one picture, also known as a shot.

With this old-fashioned splash page, a bit copy-heavy, the intention was to set a mood rather than draw the reader directly into the action. This approach makes the splash, in effect, a second cover and is especially useful when the comic contains more than one story. From *Detective Comics* #457.

Shot: One picture, but with connotation of the content of picture, the way it is composed, etc. More an aesthetic/storytelling term. Terms used to describe a shot include closeup, long shot, medium shot, extreme closeup, etc.

While we're on the subject of panels and shots: One of the most obvious beginners' mistakes is also one of the most common, that of asking the artist to draw two or more actions in a single panel. Since that's impossible, it's not a good idea to ask your penciller to do it. Using speed lines and multi-image shots (discussed below) you can *suggest* movement and multiple actions but these devices are somewhat awkward, perhaps best used sparingly.

```
KINGDOM COME #2: "Truth and Justice"/Ms. Page 2 /REVISED 2/7/96!/MARK WAID
```

PAGE TWO

PANEL ONE: PULL BACK FROM PREVIOUS IMAGE TO SHOW THAT THE BLACK
BACKGROUND IS ACTUALLY THE CORNEA OF McCAY'S OPEN EYE. NO
DIALOGUE.

PANEL TWO: PULL BACK FURTHER TO SHOW McCAY'S FULL FACE--WIDE-
EYED WITH HORROR.

1 CAP: "...to sound..."

PANEL THREE: PULL BACK FURTHER TO SHOW McCAY FULL-FIGURE.
STANDING IN WHATEVER MISTY, TIMELESS SPECTREVOID HE AND SPECTRE
HANG OUT IN BETWEEN ISSUES. SWIRLY WITH COLORS? DOESN'T MUCH
MATTER TO ME. YOUR CALL. REALLY. ANYWAY, SPECTRE STANDS BESIDE
AND SLIGHTLY BEHIND McCAY, STARING DOWN AT HIM.

2 CAP: ...angels...

3 CAP: ...no...I'M with the ANGEL...

4 CAP: ...aren't I...?

PANEL FOUR: WHILE HOLDING THE EDGE OF HIS CAPE, SPECTRE RAISES
ONE ARM HIGH, SPREADING THE CAPE WIDE TO REVEAL A BLACK VOID
WITHIN.

5 McCAY: Where have you TAKEN me? I no longer have any
                sense of TIME or PLACE...

6 SPECTRE: Time has LITTLE MEANING where we walk, Norman
                McCay. We move FREELY from MOMENT to MOMENT.

7 SPECTRE: GUIDED by YOUR VISIONS, I show you only that which
                we MUST see.

8 SPECTRE: You are DISORIENTED?

9 McCAY: ENORMOUSLY. I wasn't really ASLEEP...and yet, I
                was DREAMING again...

PANEL FIVE: AS WE MOVE IN ON THE BLACK SHADOW UNDER SPECTRE'S
CAPE, WE BEGIN TO SEE IN THAT BLACKNESS A HAZY IMAGE OF NEXT
PANEL'S ESTABLISHING SHOT.

10 SPECTRE: WERE you...?

Mark Waid's script for *Kingdom Come* #2 provides clear, concise shot descriptions and still, as in panel three, gives the artist some latitude in interpretation. Art by Alex Ross.

"...to sound..."

...angels...

...no... I'm with the angel...

...aren't I...?

WHERE HAVE YOU TAKEN ME? I NO LONGER HAVE ANY SENSE OF TIME OR PLACE...

WERE YOU...?

TIME HAS LITTLE MEANING WHERE WE WALK, NORMAN McCAY. WE MOVE FREELY FROM MOMENT TO MOMENT.

GUIDED BY YOUR VISIONS, I SHOW YOU ONLY THAT WHICH WE MUST SEE.

YOU ARE DISORIENTED?

ENORMOUSLY. I WASN'T REALLY ASLEEP... AND YET. I WAS DREAMING AGAIN...

THIS PLACE STINKS, BUT I STILL COME HERE EVERY NIGHT.

Speech balloon, word balloon or balloon: The thing containing words that lets the reader know what the character is saying.

HEY! WATCH OUT, BUB!

Pointer or tail: The thing that sticks out from the balloon and points to whichever character is talking.

WHERE DID I PUT MY CAR KEYS?
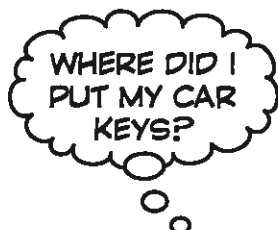
Thought balloon: A scalloped balloon that indicates the character is thinking, rather than speaking aloud. (Early comics did this by putting some of the words in the balloon in parentheses.) Instead of pointers, thought balloons have little bubbles trailing from the balloon to the general vicinity of the character's head.

Burst: A balloon with jagged edges to indicate volume/stress or broadcast/telephone transmission. Also called electric or electric balloon.

CALLING ALL CARS, CALLING ALL CARS!

BE QUIET, MAN. YOU WANT TO GET CAUGHT?
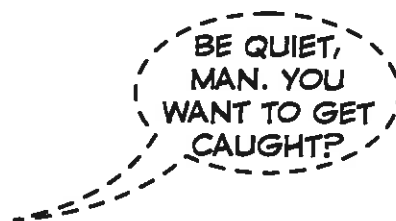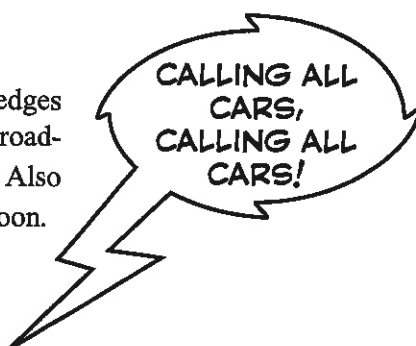
Whisper balloon: A balloon whose outline is broken into small dashes; this indicates that the character is whispering. Another way to indicate a whisper, or a low voice, is to diminish the size of the lettering.

A FEW HOURS LATER...

Caption: A sentence or sentence fragment that appears in the panel, but not in a balloon. Usually, captions are enclosed in a rectangle or box and, although they are usually at the top of the panel, they can be inserted anywhere in the shot. They are used to indicate a shift in time and/or place, as a vehicle for the author's omniscient comments or as footnotes. Recently, thought balloons have lost their popularity and writers are using, instead, captions which indicate the character's inner voice, often with the words italicized. Captions generally seem to work best when they're written in the present tense. I'm not sure why: maybe because the pictures—the other half of the comics "language"—give a sense of immediacy to the narrative that would clash with past-tense prose.

Here the writer uses captions instead of thought balloons to indicate the character's thoughts. From *Azrael* #36. Script by Dennis O'Neil. Art by Roger Robinson and James Pascoe.

Story: One issue's worth of narrative that fits the story definition.

Story arc: A story that takes several issues to tell. We borrowed this term from our television brethren.

Graphic novel: A long story, usually in special format—bigger pages, hard covers, better printing. Graphic novels, if they're done well, have greater complexity and scope than one-issue stories.

Miniseries: Another video-spawned term, this refers to a title that has a predetermined number of issues. Similarly: Maxiseries.

Flashback: The dramatization of an event that occurred earlier than the main action of the story. In other words, showing something that happened in the story's "past." Flashbacks are overused and, I think, generally to be avoided. Two caveats about them: First: Go into flashbacks only when the logic of the story demands them—when a character needs to recall something that has a direct bearing on what's happening to him, for example. (The old *Kung Fu* television series made flashbacks a regular feature and used them superbly, to show the hero's early life as a Buddhist monk and, inevitably, how what he learned at the monastery bore on whatever problem he was facing.) Never, never stick a flashback into a story arbitrarily. Second: Be certain that the reader understands that you're doing a flashback. Err on the side of being ridiculously clear. Use past tense captions. Call for special coloring and scalloped panel borders. If the flashback is being narrated, you can even ask for small head shots of the narrator to appear in the captions—a corny device, maybe, but one that insures absolute clarity.

Story spine: Screenwriter William Goldman, who introduced me to this term, says it is, simply, what the story is about. Put another, slightly more complicated way, it is the sequence of events leading to the inevitable conclusion. Any event that has nothing to do with reaching that conclusion can be said to be "off the spine."

There's another device peculiar to comics that I'd like to mention here, but I don't know what to call it—it doesn't have an accepted label. This is the use of symbols-as-words, a kind of visual shorthand. Thought balloons are a pretty good example—the scalloped edges tell the reader, without explanation from the writer, that the character is not voicing the words. Some other familiar examples:

Speed lines: These indicate motion.

Radiation lines: These show that an object is hot or radioactive or that a character is experiencing emotional agitation.

From *The Flash* #162. Art above by Paul Pelletier and Doug Hazelwood.

(opposite) From *Showcase* #4. Written by Robert Kanigher and drawn by Carmine Infantino.

Light bulb: When a light bulb appears over a character's head it indicates that he or she has just had an idea—a bright idea, of course, which is why the character is almost always grinning. The inspirational light bulb was once a staple of humor comics, but it hasn't been used much, if at all, in the last couple of decades.

Multi-image: This means exactly what it says—several images of the same character within one panel to trace the path the character has taken in the shot and, often, to indicate that the character is performing several kinds of actions in a short time. Usually, only the last image in the series appears in full color; the others are rendered in lighter colors, indicating that those images show how the character appeared a second or two ago.

Typography: By varying the style, size, and density of lettering, it's possible to suggest different kinds of speech. To my mind's ear, THIS IS A SHOUT, THIS IS A WHISPER, *this is a line spoken tensely,* this **word** is spoken with emphasis, a bit louder than normal. Once, it was standard practice for editors to make several words in each balloon bold, sometimes without regard to the content of the dialogue. The idea was to provide the reader with eye candy—to vary the presumed monotony of ordinary lettering. There may have been a bit of validity in that theory but only, I think, a bit; and when illogical words were emphasized the practice may have slightly damaged the literary and narrative quality of the work.

Before we move on to actual scripting, allow me a few lines of digression which may be useful if you want to convince your more learned friends that comics are pretty darn intellectual, by golly. Tell them that comics aren't just frivolous entertainment—no sir, comics are a semiotic entity. Semiotics, according to the best primer on the subject I know of, is "simply the analysis of signs or the study of the functioning of sign systems." So we can now refine our previous definition. To wit: Comics are a narrative
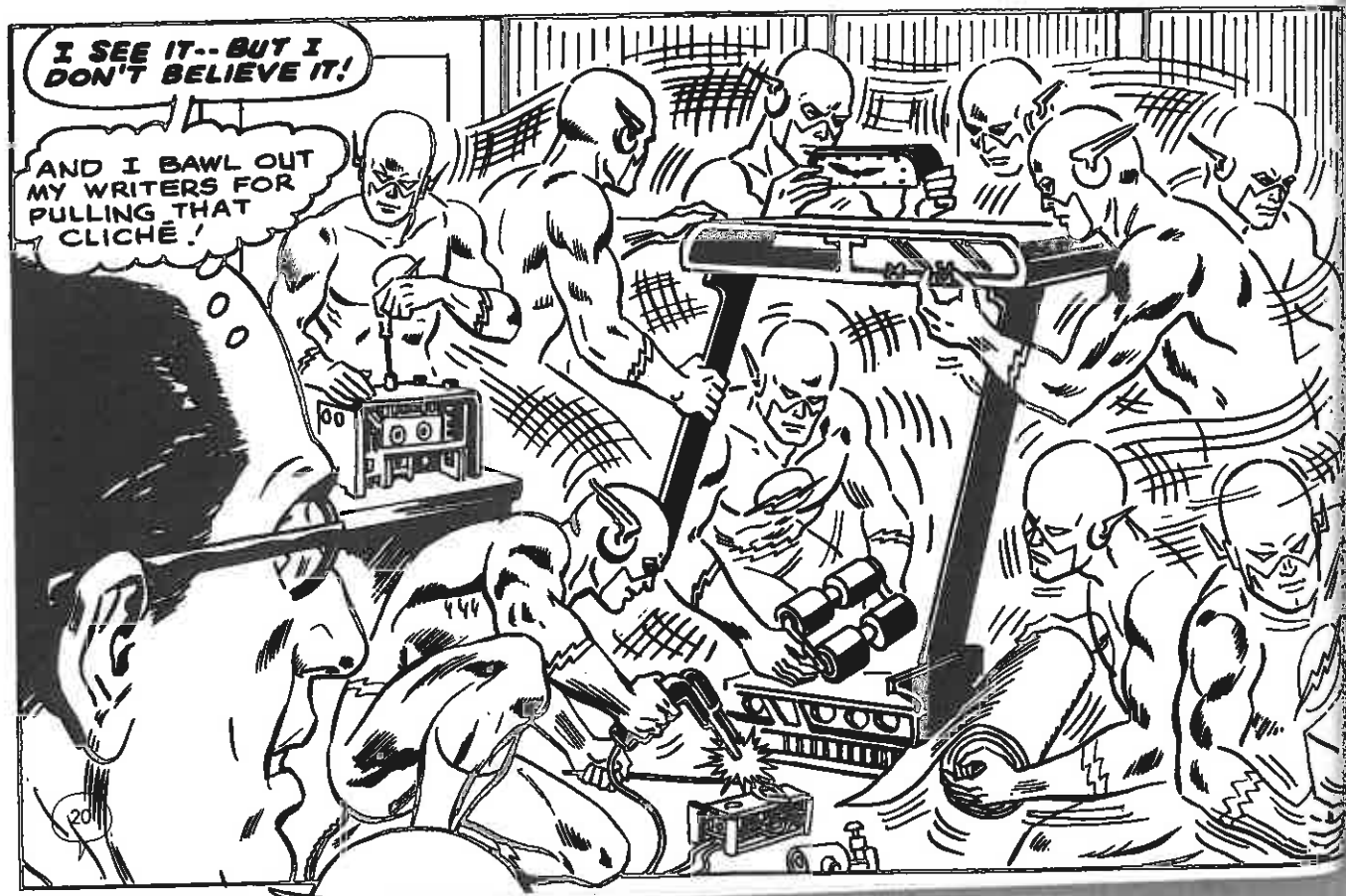
16   At the last possible moment. RED manages to leap in front of the BOTTLE CITY. creating a protective ELECTROMAGNETIC FIELD from which the CHUNK bounces aside.
      OBSESSION and MAXIMA both turn to see that RED is highly steamed that the women's battle had endangered the inhabitants of the Bottle City.
      RED sends out an impressive electromagnetic DISCHARGE that brings down a HUGE SECTION of FORTRESS CEILING .
      ... which collapses and seals OBSESSION and MAXIMA off in another part of the Fortress, far from the Bottle City.
      On the other side. OBSESSION reaches out tentatively towards the WALL of RUBBLE. taken aback by the angry Super-response ("D-Darling?"): a still fighting mad MAXIMA is headed her way.

17   Back by the Bottle City. BLUE [carrying a small box. no larger than a toaster. bearing a S.T.A.R. Labs imprint: Blue got it (pre-packaged) from a S.T.A.R. storage depot] arrives at RED's side: Red: "What took you so long?"
      BLUE looks around at the visible destruction. telling RED. "It looks like we'd better get to work before the whole place is brought down."
      Cut back to OBSESSION and MAXIMA. again trading punches as they tumble through midair into one of the Fortress's HOLOGRAPHIC DIORAMAS (which show periods from Krypton's history).
      OBSESSION pauses in mid-punch. briefly distracted by hologram of JOR-EL. who facially resembles her "darling": MAXIMA seems distracted. as well. as if she were hearing a distant voice. [Max is mentally reading the approach of . . well, you'll see next panel ...]
      A Kryptonian WAR-SUIT suddenly smashes into the place, knocking MAXIMA aside.

18   OBSESSION warily faces off against the looming WAR-SUIT.   they divide into
      But then. BOTH SUPERMEN emerge, phasing out of the WAR-SUIT!   2 MORE SUPERMEN IN
      And then. the TWO SUPERMEN merge into each other, transforming into the classic DIFFERENT
      caped SUPERMAN. who reaches out with loving open arms to OBSESSION!   COLORS!
      OBSESSION and SUPERMAN lovingly embrace and kiss!
      And then, as OBSESSION's EYES widen. SUPERMAN begins to crumble into dust!
      The 4 SUPERMEN keeps on crumbling as OBSESSION screams in horror!

19   Cut to the screaming OBSESSION. in the same pose from the end of last page, but now we can see MAXIMA standing behind her. Max's hands gripping the sides of Obsession's head; there's a GLOW to Max's eyes [yep. most of last page was a mental illusion which Max had fed into her mind]!
      OBSESSION's eyes glaze over as MAXIMA brain-blasts her, leaving her with the fleeting impression that she must shun Superman or else cause his death. while numbing her memory of the Fortress.
      As RED emerges from the WAR-SUIT, OBSESSION (her eyes blank and staring) streaks straight up and away, crashing through the ceiling of the fortress on her way out. [She's on her way to a future issue of SUPERBOY, to whose title character she'll eventually transfer her affections.]
      RED approaches MAXIMA, looking ceilingward. "Where'd you send her?" Max: "Away. She's of no further consequence to you."
      MAXIMA suddenly looks wary, "Where's your other half?"

Penciller: The first part of the art team. The person who draws the pictures in pencil. Pencillers share with writers the primary storytelling chores. The finished pencils are sent to the writer or editor for placement of the dialogue balloons.

Inker: The artist who adds India ink to the penciled pictures to make them easy to print. The inker does a lot more than go over pencil lines with a pen or brush. Inkers add texture, shading, shadows. If a panel has the illusion of depth, or convinces you that the scene is happening at night, or the figures in it are convincingly three-dimensional, thank the inker.

The stages of creating a page from *Superman: Man of Tomorrow* #10. Plot by Roger Stern comes first. Pencils by Paul Ryan. Script by Stern. Inks by Brett Breeding.

SUPERMAN: MAN OF TOMORROW #10 - "Who Do You Love?" - Roger Stern -18

1 Dana	All right -- hold it right there!!
2 Dana	I don't know who you are in that walking tank, but --
3 Warsuit	It's okay, Dana --
4 Red:	-- it's just us: Maxima won't bother us anymore.
5 Dana	Blue .. Red ...
6 Blue	Blue ..
7 Green	Green ...
8 Yellow	Yellow ...
9 Red	Red ... we all love you!
10 Dana	You ... do?
11 Red	Mmm-hmm.
12 Dana	Oh, darling, I've dreamed of ... this?
13 Red	We'll love you forever, Dana ...
14 Decayed	... till death ...
15 Other	do
16 Third	us
17 Fourth	part
18 Dana	No! No-No-No-No!!

Letterer: The person who letters the copy and draws the balloons, captions, and outlines the panels in India ink.

Colorist: When penciller, inker, and letterer have done their work, the entire job is photographically reduced to comic book-page size—6 1/2 by 10 1/4 inches—and given to the last of the creative personnel, a colorist who uses a form of watercolor to bring the story to multi-hued life. In recent years, many colorists do their work on computers, which eliminates the need to reduce the page photographically—the art is simply scanned, then given to the colorist as a digital file. This ultra-modern method is easier and it gives the colorist a much larger number of options.