FULL-SCRIPT VERSUS PLOT-FIRST

The writing of comic books does not contradict the rule which states that there is seldom one absolute, inarguable, unimpeachably right way to do anything. I know of no two good writers whose scripts look the same.

So there is no right way? No. The way that works is the right way. Your pages may be vastly different from mine, but if they do the job, they're perfectly splendid.

And what job is that? Just this: telling your story as clearly as possible. I emphasize clearly because one of the recurring and embarrassingly valid criticisms of modern comic books, particularly the adventure and fantasy titles, is that they're extremely difficult to understand on the most basic level. Sometimes, it might be easier to breeze through your little sister's dog-eared copy of *Finnegan's Wake* than to understand why the guy in the purple cape is bashing the guy in the orange mask. And what is the guy in the purple cape's name? Who's behind the orange mask? Where on (or off) the Earth are they? What year is this? What century? If the writer and artists have done their jobs, the reader will be fed the answers to these questions without ever realizing it. The technical term for giving readers information necessary to understand the story is *exposition* and we'll return to it shortly. At the moment, we're concerned with the mechanics of presenting the words and pictures. Fail at these and nothing, including the niftiest exposition in the history of narrative, will have any meaning for the audience.

There are two kinds of formats (with dozens of variations) for getting your story to your artistic collaborators and, eventually, to the reader. At DC Comics, where I work, we call them "plot-first" and "full-script."

Plot-First

This method was devised in the early sixties by Marvel Comics' founder, guru, guiding light, and eternal inspiration, Stan Lee, who taught all of us who have come after him a lot, including his way of putting a story down on paper. When Stan was creating Marvel, he was writing the entire line of magazines virtually alone—about fourteen super

GL/Dragon Lord 1 -- Moench -- 3

PAGE THREE: Medium shot on the two (and maybe portions of the Dragon statues); Jong Li still puzzled; Master still inscrutable. Li: But why is it lost? Master: Because gloating is not becoming of greatness. Li again: But...how can one be both humble and great?

Full shot of Jong Li & Master passing between the facing rows of Dragon statues toward temple's rear entrance. (Aerial shot?) Master: It is the only way because it is two ways, the binding of contrast, the graceful line between yin and yang. Were you truly an excellent pupil you would know it as the Way of the Dragon. Li: Yes, of course, Master.

Twoshot, maybe from rear; Master has still not so much as looked in Li's direction. Li: ~~Ah~~ but I need to-- Master: Those who need for want, and those who want forever need. Only by remaining selfless is the self satisfied, all wants and needs fulfilled.

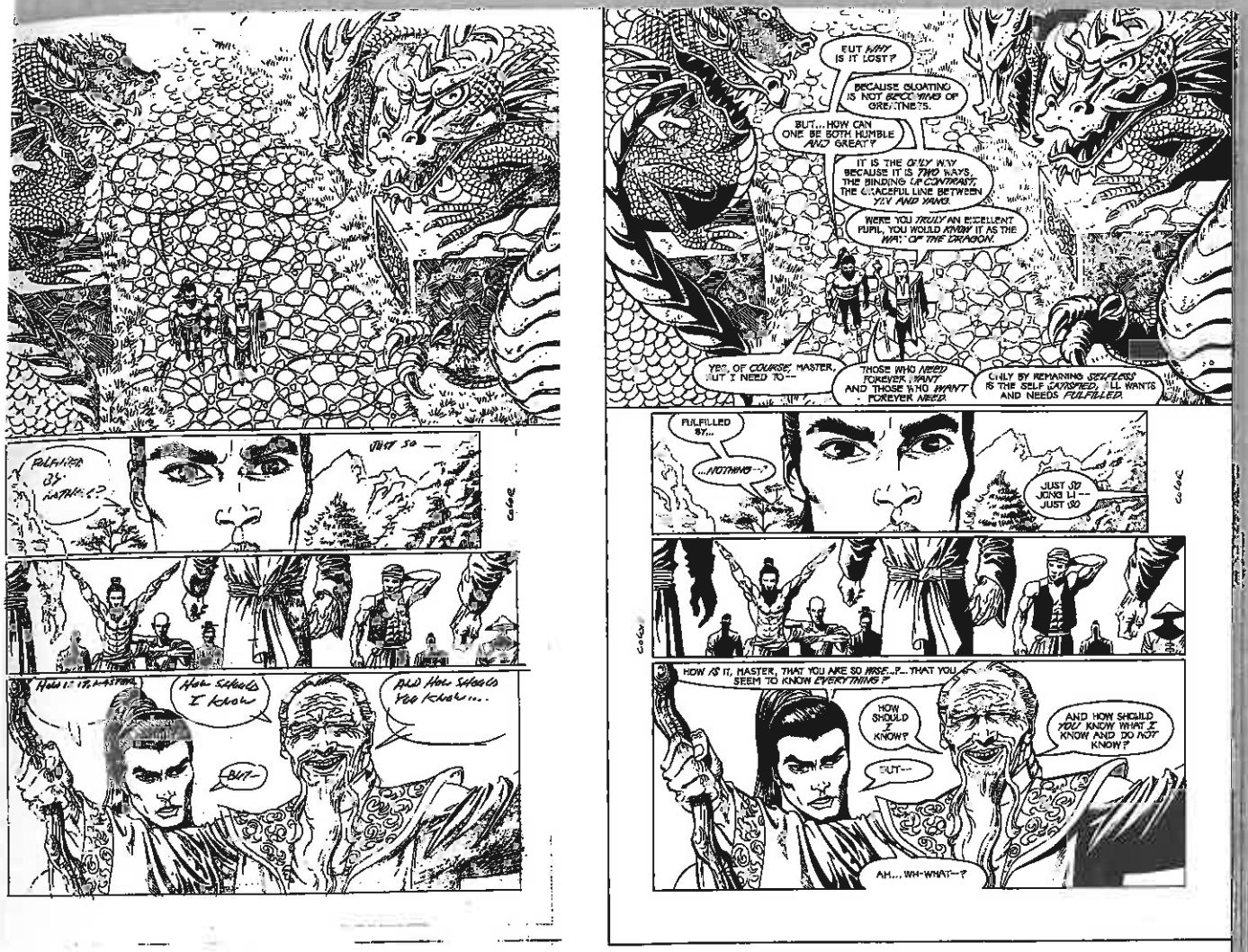
Small closeup utterly baffled Jong Li: Fulfilled by...nothing? Master/off-panel: Just so.

Shift to (some of) the other monks, their exercise now finished, starting to fall into line and file away from the courtyard's exercise area. (No need to show it yet, but FYI: They're also heading for the statue-formed Way of the Dragon leading to temple's rear entrance.)

Li's VO: How is it, Master, that you are so wise? That you seem to know everything?

Shift back to the two; Jong Li now regarding Master skeptically -- as Master displays emotion for the first time, spreading his hands and smiling broadly in sheer delight, pleased with his own joke. Master: How should I know? Li: But-- Master again: And how should you know what I know and do not know? Li again. Ah...wh-what...?

Doug Moench's plot for *Green Lantern: Dragon Lord* gives the artist a lot of fairly detailed information and even incorporates some dialogue. Pencils by Paul Gulacy and inks by Joe Rubenstein.



hero titles, some westerns, some humor books, and occasional odd projects that don't categorize easily. He was also editing all of the above, writing ad copy, supervising a staff, doing radio interviews, assembling letters pages, conferring with artists, and attending publishing meetings. (I don't know if he was sleeping. Maybe not.) He simply didn't have time to write full scripts.

So, instead, he gave his pencillers a plot—a few paragraphs outlining the basics of the story. The artist took this outline to his drawing board and drew the 125 or so panels that told the story visually. Those pencil drawings were returned to Stan, who then wrote the captions and dialogue and drew the balloons, captions, and sound effects onto the artwork in a blue line that doesn't photograph. The artwork was next sent to a letterer, and then to the

GL/Dragon Lord I -- Moench -- 1

PAGE THREE

JONG LI 1) But why is it lost?

MASTER 2) Because gloating is not becoming of greatness.

JONG LI 3) But...how can one be both humble and great?

MASTER 4) It is the only way because it is two ways, the binding of contrast, the graceful line between yin and yang.

MASTER 5) Were you truly an excellent pupil, you would know it as the Way of the Dragon.

JONG LI 6) Yes, of course, Master, but I need to--

MASTER 7) Those who need forever want, and those who want forever need.

MASTER 8) Only be remaining selfless is the self satisfied, all wants and needs fulfilled.

JONG LI 9) Fulfilled by...

JONG LI 10) ...nothing?

MASTER/OFF-PANEL 11) Just so, Jong Li -- just so.

JONG LI 12) How is it, Master, that you are so wise? That you seem to know everything?

MASTER 13) How should I know?

JONG LI 14) But--

MASTER 15) And how should you know what I know and do not know?

JONG LI 16) Ah...wh-what--?

inker, and, finally, to the colorist. Working like this, Stan could do several different issues of different titles virtually simultaneously and thus maintain his Herculean schedule.

In Marvel's early years, plots were pretty sketchy affairs, seldom more than a page or two of typing, and sometimes less. Stan was working with brilliant artists like Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, superb visual storytellers with decades of experience who neither required nor wanted a lot of detail. (Eventually, I've heard, Stan dispensed with plots altogether when collaborating with Messrs. Kirby and Ditko; a brief conversation was all that either of them needed.) Today, many writers present their artists with plots that are many pages long, with every important detail literally spelled out. Often, a writer will break the plot down to pages, and even to panels; the excellent and industrious Doug Moench has been known to do plots which are longer than the final, printed comic book.

That's the "plot-first" method, and it is still preferred by many writers, for reasons that we'll discuss later.

From *Azrael* #1. Script by Dennis O'Neil and art by Joe Quesada and Jimmy Palmiotti.

Azrael #1/

PAGE TWO

1 - OKAY, WE BASICALLY REPRISE PREVIOUS PAGE, ONLY WE'VE PULLED BACK TO GET THE ROOM IN. IT'S A RICH GUY'S PENTHOUSE LIVING ROOM WITH STATUES AND PAINTINGS AND PRICEY ELECTRONICS AND STUFF. AZ STANDS OVER Carleton LeHah, A FAT GUY WEARING A RICH GUY'S SMOKING JACKET WHO SITS IN AN OVERSTUFFED CHAIR. LIGHTING FROM THOSE BABY SPOTS THAT DEPOSIT LITTLE POOLS OF LUMINESCENCE AROUND THE PREMISES. SOMEWHERE IN SHOT, A DOOR WHICH PRESUMABLY LEADS TO ANOTHER PART OF THE PAD. OUTSIDE, OF COURSE, IT IS NIGHT. MAYBE SHOOT THIS ACROSS TOP OF PAGE.

AZ: --the punishment of death by fiery sword!

CAPTION: [ital] My words were fierce, my threat a promise.

2 - AZ POV: CARLETON. HE'S PULLING A MONSTER AUTOMATIC FROM UNDER HIS SMOKER.

CAPTION: [ital] Yet there was no dread in his face, none of the panic I was accustomed to seeing at moments like this.

CARL: I do not think so, Mister Angel.

3 - CARL'S POV. AZ.

AZ: You dare threaten Azrael with a FIREARM? You think mere BULLETS can harm--

4 - AZ POV: CARL FIRING AT HIM. OL' CARL IS COOL AS A VIRGIN'S BRITCHES.

SOUND: Kha-BLAM BLAM BLAM

5 - AZ TAKING THE SLUGS

AZ: Aagh

CAPTION: [ital] The bullets tore through the protective garment I wore beneath my robes as though it were not there. And into my flesh.

6 - AZ LEANS AGAINST THE GLASS DOOR, STILL HOLDING THE SWORD IN HIS RIGHT HAND AS LEFT HAND CLUTCHES HIS PROFUSELY BLEEDING BOSOM. COOL CARL STANDS NEAR HIM SORT OF LOOSELY AIMING GUN.

CARL: To me, Mister Angel, it seems as though these bullets have done a great deal of harm.

Full-Script

Writers who choose the full-script method produce manuscripts that resemble movie and television scripts. Although, as I mentioned above, almost every writer I know uses a different format, the basics are always the same: Each page contains descriptions of the visual content of the panels, followed by captions, labeled—big surprise here—"caption," and then by what the character is saying or, in the case of thought balloons, thinking; these are labeled with the character's name. It is essential that the writer also indicate each comic book page; this is usually done by typing that information before the first panel of the page. Note an important difference: Comic book pages contain all the visual and verbal information that will appear on a given page in the final printed magazine. Manuscript pages are the pieces of paper on which this information appears. (It's nice if these are given numbers, too, in case the manuscript gets dropped or scrambled during a ninja attack or blows out a window or gets mixed up for some other reason.)

So which is better, plot-first or full-script? Remember the rule mentioned earlier: there is seldom one absolute, inarguable, unimpeachably right way to do anything. "Right" is whatever gets the job well done.

But each method does have its strengths and weaknesses. Let's briefly examine them.

Azrael #1/

CARL: One more, in the middle of the forehead--

PAGE THREE

1 - AZ LASHES OUT WITH THE SWORD IN THE VICINITY OF CARL'S FACE--

CARL: AAAG

CAPTION: [ital] I despised myself for the hot flash of satisfaction I felt as my blade tore and burned.

2 - CARL STAGGERS AWAY FROM STILL BLEEDING/SWORD-HOLDING AZ CLUTCHING HIS--CARL'S--FACE, WHICH IS ALSO BLEEDING. HE HAS DROPPED THE GUN. TWO MEN BEARING UZIS (OR OTHER NIFTY HIGH-TECH SUB MACHINE GUNS) ENTER FROM THE AFOREMENTIONED DOOR.

CARL: FRANCOIS! PATRICK!

CAPTION: [ital] His voice was a shriek.

3 - CU CARL CLUTCHING BLEEDING FACE, HURT AND MORE THAN A TAD MIFFED

CARL: KILL HIM!

4 - CARL AND FRANCOIS FIRE THE UZIS--

SOUND: brkebrkebrkebrkebrk

5 AND THE SLUGS SMASH THE GLASS DOORS, THROUGH WHICH AZ IS EXITING.

SOUND: t-zhing t-zhing

SOUND: KHA-REEESH

CAPTION: [ital] Again, my body shuddered as it was struck. My moans were lost in the sound of shattering glass and the stutter of the weapons.

6 - AZ AT PARAPET OF TERRACE, NIGHT, AS I BELIEVE I MENTIONED.

CAPTION: Sound that boomed from the street below drew me toward the edge of the terrace. Drums, horns, whistles, the whinny of horses--these I heard--

One-Damn-Thing-After-Another Structure

You won't find this term in any textbook or lexicon; I made it up to label the structure often found in early comics, and one that writers sometimes still use, not always to the benefit of their work. It may have been inspired by those Saturday-afternoon movie serials that a lot of future comics writers attended when they were kids. If you're younger than fifty, you've never seen a serial in a theater, but you may have seen one, or part of one, on a classic movie TV channel or rented one from a video store. What happens is, the good guy(s) and the bad guy(s) have a series of encounters, usually violent, that end indecisively until the forces of righteousness prevail and somebody who sneers a lot is either trundled off to the hoosegow or perishes. Sometimes what they're fighting over changes, but the essential conflict doesn't; two powerful antagonists bash each other and the nobler of them eventually wins.

This is not sophisticated stuff.

But it can be entertaining, at least theoretically, provided each encounter is in itself clever and the whole project moves along very briskly. But it can also be boring, possibly because it does not engage much of the reader's mind. It's a bit like watching a dancing bear: cute as hell—for five minutes. If just a single one of those encounters is not witty and/or clever, your readers will either find something else to do or will dutifully plow through your story rather than being amused by it.

I guess what I'm saying is, Don't try this at home, kids.

I'd like to offer you instead a simple structure, one I've used hundreds of times, that's as foolproof as anything in the writing business ever is. I call it (please imagine a drum roll here):

O'Neil's Heavy-Duty, Industrial-Strength Structure for a Single-Issue Comic Book Story

Those of you who are familiar with screenwriting or playwriting techniques will note that what follows is simply a version of the three-act structure that is standard procedure in those forms. I evolved it years ago, before I'd ever heard of the noble three-act structure, because my early editors wanted a lot of action and usually insisted that the story be complete in a single issue. I accept no applause for this: The three-act structure is the most widely used because it is the most logical. Most stories fall into three parts whether we want them to or not. I just did what came naturally.

I'll begin by giving you the structure in outline form and then try to explain what it means.

Act I

The hook.

Inciting incident.

Establish situation and conflict.

(Major visual action.)

Act II

Develop and complicate situatio

(Major visual action.)

Act III

Events leading to:

The climax.

(Major visual action.)

Denouement.

Act I

The Hook

Two definitions for this. The submission guide that DC Comics used to send to writers defines the hook as "the essence of what makes your story unique and nifty." I call that *premise.* In the structure we're discussing, the hook is something on the first page—often the splash page (see definition above)—that a) gets the story moving and b) motivates the guy who's killing time in a comic shop, casually paging through a book that caught his attention, to buy it. This is analogous to the pre-credit sequence in a James Bond flick: The protagonist is involved in a venture that is exciting and interesting. But the comic book scripter's job is trickier than that of Bond's writers; they have five minutes to get the job done; comics writers have a page or, at best, two.

So how do you hook 'em? Let me quote one of the mantras often heard around the office in which I currently work: "Open on action." Pretty self-explanatory, huh? Characters doing something, preferably something big and dramatic, will probably capture a potential reader's attention. If they're doing something big and dramatic that poses a question, even better, as you'll learn in the next paragraph.

The second kind of hook: a question. A character is reacting in horror to something the reader can't see: What is it? A character is opening a box: What's inside?

Hook number three: danger. In the fifties, Joe Kubert did dozens of covers for DC's so-called war comics in which American soldiers—usually the "battle-happy Joes of Easy Company"—were about to walk into peril that they couldn't see because the enemy was lurking in a culvert or was massed around a corner or was otherwise hidden from the battle-happy Joes. That's classic danger hook stuff. A simpler, cruder version might be someone shooting at a hero, or about to shoot, or an innocent person falling out a window or from a plane, or an innocent maiden enjoying a bonbon unaware that Dracula's nasty older brother is coming in the window behind her . . .you get the idea.

Hook number four: An image so striking that the reader has to continue. Obviously, you need an extraordinary artist to achieve this; it's really more his job than yours. Will Eisner made it his signature opening and managed it brilliantly dozens of times. But, alas, few of us are Eisners . . .

If your story is such that you can't open on action, or ask a question, or put somebody in jeopardy, or smack the reader in the face with an unforgettable picture, you can either a) rethink your opening or b) at least have a character about to open a door—the reader may want to see what's on the other side.

What you never, never want to do is open on an inanimate object—a building, for example—unless it is so unusual that, in itself, it excites curiosity. People are interested in people, not things. You want to grab their attention and, not incidentally, get your story going. Still-lifes, while splendid on the walls of museums, are not the way to do that.

There's principle of dramaturgy in general, and screenwriting in particular, that's germane here: Always start a scene as late as possible. We'll elaborate on that in a bit.

(opposite) In this third page of *JLA* #43, the character's reaction to something off-panel creates a compelling question to hook the reader. Script by Mark Waid. Art by Howard Porter and Drew Geraci.

Inciting incident

This is the event that causes the hero to react, that provides the danger or puzzle or task that galvanizes the hero into action. According to Robert McKee, it is what "radically upsets balance of forces in the hero's life." This is a definition that applies to a lot of Alfred Hitchcock's movies, those in which Jimmy Stewart or Hank Fonda is a more-or-less ordinary guy suddenly faced with a perilous situation. In crime fiction, it is often—surprise!—a crime, usually a murder. In the first *Terminator* flick, it was the Arnold the Android's appearance in our era. In super hero stories, it is usually, but not always, a threat to the common good—like a geeky mad scientist planning to death-ray Metropolis into cinders.

If the writer can incorporate the inciting incident into the hook, excellent. If not, it has to appear early in the story, or, if it occurred before the story opened, it must be referred to and explained as soon as possible. Think of it as the starting gun.

No wasted space here. Although Grant Morrison's *JLA* #34 script splash is quiet, it immediately pulls the reader into the story. Art by Howard Porter and John Dell.

Situation and conflict

Answer some questions for the reader: Where are we? Who's the good guy? What, or who, is he combatting? What's at stake? Until these elements are established, your story is at the starting line. (One of my former bosses insisted that the conflict had to be established no later than page two. That's a bit extreme because—all together now—there is seldom one absolute, inarguable, unimpeachably right way to do anything. But you risk boring or, worse, losing readers if you wait too long to let them in on the conflict.)

You should also introduce the McGuffin as early as possible. Since the McGuffin is always essential to the conflict, you'll do this naturally as you get your story going. So what's a McGuffin?

Jason Todd, the second of Batman's three Robins, won't live to see another birthday. This scene established the impulsiveness that eventually gets him killed. Script by Jim Starlin and art by Jim Aparo and Mike DeCarlo.

McGuffin

Time for another pesky definition: According to Alfred Hitchcock, who coined the term., a McGuffin is what the hero and villain are fighting over—the code, the hidden will, the treasure map, the computer disk which contains the information that will save the city. Said Mr. H.: "The only thing that matters is that the plans, documents, secrets must seem to be of vital importance to the characters . . . to the narrator, they're of no importance whatever."

If you think, therefore, that you should not expend much brain power devising the McGuffin, you're wrong. Although it is, to the narrator, "of no importance whatever," it must be credible. If the conflict is over something inconsequential or silly, your hero is diminished—what kind of a hero fusses about trivialities?—and that can seriously dumb down your story. (The exception to this occurs when you want to be dumb, or humorous, or both. For example, in Woody Allen's early and still-hilarious movie *What's Up, Tiger Lily?*, the good guys and bad guys vie for the world's best chicken salad recipe.) If the McGuffin is clever, as it usually was in Hitchcock's films, you've given the reader some added enjoyment.

Okay. We have our hero, our villain, our conflict/McGuffin. We know where we are geographically and historically. We are now at the end of what screenwriters would call "act one."

Act II

We should now take the story in a new direction. Something unexpected happens, maybe something that involves hero in combat with villain. If you're writing a super hero story, that something will probably involve action and a demonstration of what powers and abilities make your super hero super. If you're not doing super hero stuff, you should still try to surprise the reader by complicating your protagonist's life or introducing a new problem/obstacle for him. Get him in trouble. You want to convince the reader that he cannot possibly win. As an old short story writer's adage advises: Put your hero out on the end of a limb and start sawing.

And when you've developed the new situation(s) and complication(s) you've introduced, you're at the end of act two.

This would be a fine place to write another action scene or another plot development and preferably both.

Act III

Then, you race for the finish. Call this act three. In your remaining space, your hero solves his biggest problems, if not all his problems, vanquishes threats and evils, and restores peace and tranquility. It's nice if all that leads to a final confrontation/action scene because then you've adhered to the principle of rising action which I haven't told you about yet, but will. It's also nice—some purists would insist that it is necessary—to answer all questions: Never leave the reader wondering exactly how or why something happened.

Denouement

You're at the end of act three, and of your story. But don't type "The End" and hit the computer's off switch just yet. You might want to finish with a denouement. This is a kind of postscript, a brief scene that follows the climax and eases the reader out of your world. You may use it to answer that bothersome final question you were forced to leave unanswered in the climax, or show how your characters have been changed by their adventures, or indicate what will happen to them next. Keep it brief; it should occupy no more than a page in a 22-page story. If you find yourself writing a lengthy denouement, rethink your structure. The story's finished, dammit. Your reader may enjoy a bit of additional information, or a final visit with your characters, but if you've done your work well, there's really very little left to interest them.

Your story has done something all dramatic forms have in common: given the audience a sense of completion. This is true whether you've done a complete-in-this-issue story or written a part of a continuing saga. The characters may have further adventures ad infinitum, but for now, they're done. All questions are answered, all conflicts resolved. The end. As Tracy Ullman says, "Go home."

Now you can hit that off switch.

The above is, of necessity, oversimplified. For example, you need not introduce complications

The ring is the McGuffin in these panels from *Superman: Lex 2000* #1. Written by Greg Rucka and illustrated by Dwayne Turner and Danny Miki

and action scenes only at the end of acts one and two. The internal logic of your story might demand they be put elsewhere, or additional complications/action scenes be inserted throughout the entire piece. If so, do it. Don't twist your plot out of shape just to conform to the outline. But often, you'll find that complications/action scenes fall naturally at act ends or beginnings.

There's another way to think about constructing a story that bears at least a few paragraphs' worth of mention, since it was favored by one of comics' greatest storytellers, Carl Barks, who wrote and illustrated hundreds of excellent Donald Duck stories for the Disney organization and, incidentally, created Donald's miserly uncle, Scrooge McDuck, surely one of the century's most memorable characters. Mr. Barks's narrative strategy, as explained to interviewer Donald Ault, reminds me of something the great crime fiction writer Dashiell Hammet said somewhere, that the best plot is the plot that allows for the most good scenes.

Here's what Mr. Barks told Mr. Ault:

". . .We always tried to get a good, interesting, climactic situation and then find a reason for that situation . . .It was a good way of making stories . . . to find a good, big climactic gag—a very interesting situation—and then build everything up to that . . ."

In other words, work backwards and let the story structure emerge organically from the incidents needed to arrive at your big finish. With this method, the writer is sure that, at least, his story is going somewhere. It does not absolve the writer from constructing a narrative that keeps moving, has rising action, concerns interesting characters who behave logically, and features some entertaining incidents before and in addition to the grand climax. Rather, it's a different process for arriving at those elements.

The danger is past, but there's still one question to be answered, and Dennis O'Neil answers it in this denouement from *Legends of the Dark Knight* #100. Art by Dave Taylor.

Suspense, mentioned above, is another way to insure against losing the reader. A definition would seem to be unavoidable here. I don't know exactly where I got this one from, but it served me well during the years I was teaching at Manhattan's School of Visual Arts: Suspense is the state or condition of mental uncertainty or excitement, as in awaiting decision or outcome, usually accompanied by a degree of apprehension or anxiety.

Suspense is almost the opposite of surprise. A reader in a state of suspense knows crucial facts that the character in the story doesn't and he generally knows them for quite a while. Hitchcock explained this with an imaginary situation: We're watching two people chatting, and there is a bomb beneath the table they're sitting at. Suddenly, there is an explosion. We're surprised and startled and that's pretty much that. But if we know where the bomb is, and the chatters don't, we fret, wondering if they'll leave the room or get blown to bits. As Hitchcock explained it to François Truffaut: "The public is aware that the bomb is going to explode at one o'clock and there is a clock in the decor. The public can see that it is a quarter to one. In these conditions, this same innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the scene. The audience is longing to warn the characters on the screen: "You shouldn't be talking about such trivial matters. There's a bomb beneath you and it's about to explode."

Surprise has limited entertainment value. *Suspense* can keep readers enthralled. Properly executed, it builds emotion until you're ready to grant your panting audience release from it.

Working with series characters, as in comics, you can't really expect the audience to worry about whether the hero will survive that damn bomb. They know there will be another issue of the comic book. (An exception might occur if the series were ending, and everyone knew it, but don't plan on building a career from the instances when that happens.) But they don't know whether a likable but minor character will live through the deadly peril.

Another way to create a form of suspense is to cause the readers to wonder how the hero will accomplish something. Sure, Captain Wonderful will escape from the death trap—he is Captain Wonderful, after all, and his name is on the cover. But how? He's chained to a ten-ton obelisk that's sunk in a swimming pool full of man-eating guppies and he has a killer case of indigestion besides. How is the clever writer going to get him out of this one? Add another element and you just might have genuine suspense: Cap'n W. is in that swimming pool and, of course, he'll free himself before he becomes a guppy entree—but . . . his saintly grandmother is slowly sliding into a giant carrot slicer at the Giant Home Appliances Exhibition. How on earth is the Cap'n going to get out of the pool, dry himself off, change clothes, pick up the dry cleaning, and save Granny who is sliding into a carrot slicer at the GHAE which, I forgot to mention, is in Australia. Readers will be certain, in some remote part of their psyches, that Cap will succeed, but they'll be desperate to learn how. Your answer to that will constitute entertainment.

A final example of suspense: We don't doubt that the hero will best the villain, but the villain has been so darn cagey, we have no idea how that laudable end will be accomplished. One of television's great and enduring series, *Columbo,* asks the "how" question in virtually every episode produced. The structure is always the same: We see some snotty person commit a perfect murder. The louse seems to have anticipated every contingency. The crime is foolproof. There appears to be

If you're prepared for the long haul—that is, if you're working on a series and you have reason to believe that you'll be working on it for a while—it's a good idea to let your hero fail occasionally. Heroic failure is the stuff of great drama, of the world's great tragedies, and is worthy of your consideration in and of itself. It allows you to plant doubt in regular readers' minds: Maybe this time, Granny will get fricasseed.

Keep the story moving

This is the last method of ensuring that readers won't be bored, and the most obvious: Never write a scene, or a single panel, that does not contribute directly to your plot. Don't look in on your characters, like a nosy neighbor. Go to them only when they're doing or saying something important. The great Russian short-story writer and playwright Anton Chekhov said that if you have a gun above the mantelpiece in Act One, be sure to shoot it before the final curtain falls. Otherwise, it will only serve to distract the audience. Edgar Allan Poe, whose poems and stories you read in high school literature texts, said that every word should contribute to the emotion you're trying to engender in the reader. We bow to the masters, who knew what they were talking about. Remember, you'd rather eat ground glass than bore the reader, and pointless scenes—or panels, or lines of dialogue—will do exactly that.

I'm willing to grant the possibility of an exception to this principle: a scene that is just so darn amusing that, although it has nothing to do with the plot, it will paralyze the reader with delight. The danger here is, what you find egregiously entertaining might leave the reader yawning. Better not to take the chance.

The outline states (parenthetically) that the end of each act should incorporate a major visual action. This applies mostly to super hero stuff. Why? Because anyone who buys a book with a cover picture of an overdeveloped mesomorph wearing a cape and mask doing something spectacular expects a certain kind of fiction. If they're anticipating a costumed demigod vanquishing a horde of vampire dinosaurs and you give them a shy schoolgirl dreading the possibility of not getting an A on her sociology test, regardless of how brilliantly you portray the poor dear's travail, they will be disappointed if they're saintly souls and seriously furious if they're like the rest of us. You've cheated them; you've stolen their money. They will not buy your work again and they may write you a really nasty letter.

(opposite) The hero fails. Bad for him, but good for entertaining readers, who shouldn't always be able to predict a story's ending. From *Legends of the Dark Knight* #16. Script by Dennis O'Neil. Art by Trevor Von Eeden, Russell Braun and José Garcia-Lopez.