



(In No Particular Order)

13 Lessons Learned
from Making Comics,
1990 - 2015

by
Scott Marshall



Introduction

Once or twice a year for the last five years or so, someone has asked me to come and talk to a group about making comics. I try to prepare for these talks by writing notes and slideshows, preparing materials I can hand out, and so on.

During the same period, I also started curating a Tumblr site of useful stuff I find online; it's called How To Draw Comics The Marshall Way, because that is the kind of thing I find funny.

Anyway, these tutorials and the tumblr led me to realize that it is kind of pointless for me to try to teach aspiring cartoonists things like how to draw this or that, how to work in correct perspective and so on. There are already literally tons of great books on those subjects and more.

But what I can offer, I realized, is some insights that I have gained for myself in over 25 years of making comics. So, in no particular order, here they are: I hope you find them useful, and I hope you make comics that make you happy. If you do, please get in touch and tell me about them!

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There's always more to learn.

Don't let yourself be daunted by how "little" you know.

Make a list of what you're good at and what you're bad at. Identify 3 specific, achievable things you want to work on, and work on them until you are satisfied enough to start improving something else.

You may discover that as you improve in multiple areas, you need to go back and work on something again! This is the kind of problem that you *want* to have.



Use reference.

For anatomy, for places, for as much as you can.

This doesn't mean you should trace everything; that can rob artwork of its energy. Professional artists use models, photos, Google Sketchup, and many other tools to create artwork that has a level of realism (or not) that is unlikely to occur from your imagination. Think of reference as the starting blocks from which you launch yourself into the race.

(On the other hand)

The late, great Wally Wood famously wrote:

“Never draw anything you can copy, never copy anything you can trace, never trace anything you can cut out and paste up.”

③

Be an actor.

If you are writing a script, read it out loud; give the characters voices. You may discover what looks fine on the screen sounds stilted or wrong once read aloud.

If you are drawing characters, use your own face and body to reflect theirs. If they are supposed to be smiling, smile when you draw them. If they are supposed to be angry, look fierce. You may be surprised at what a difference it can make.

Learn the principle of what actors call “instant forgiveness.” If you make a mark “wrong” and screw up your drawing, don’t pitch a fit; forgive yourself instantly and get back to work. The show must go on.



Study the masters.

We all have writers and artists who we admire and who make us want to create our own comics. Don't be afraid to copy them and try to figure out how they made what they did. But don't also just become a copy of them. Find out who *they* admired, and look at that stuff as well.

If you're a writer, read everything, from classic literature to the internet. If you're an artist, go to galleries. Immerse yourself in the wider world and bring it back to your comics.

Real artists ship.

-Steve Jobs

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Get out of your comfort zone.

The common wisdom is to write what you know. That wisdom is wrong. Write and draw things you don't entirely know or understand, and do the research required to understand them.

We all have a comfort zone. Look for ways to stretch outside of it. Develop a deeper understanding of comics not just in your culture, but others as well.

⑥

Don't worry about tools or technique.

There is no “right way” to make comics.

The right tools and techniques are the ones that get your pages done, in a timeframe and at a level of quality that you are happy with. They might vary from one story to the next. It doesn't matter.

Next to “where do you get your ideas?”, the silliest thing you can ask an artist is what tools they use to draw. Try them all and see what works for you. And try not to go broke doing it.



Level up.

Staying motivated can be tough. I like to give myself regular achievable targets; it could be something public, like participating in 24 Hour Comics Day or National Novel Writing Month. Or, it could be something that only I know about.

If you complete a challenge, reward yourself! Cartooning can be lonely work. Don't be shy to share your accomplishments and enjoy some recognition.

Feeling stuck?

Consider this, paraphrased from Stephen King:

Set aside a consistent time to work every day. Crank out a first draft of your work as quickly as you can, then put it away for a few days or weeks; then take it out and revise it with fresh eyes.



Be professional.

Making your own comics means you will also be publishing online or in print; perhaps drawing commissions for fans; tabling at conventions; dealing with comics shops and distributors.

Whether you like it or not, you are slowly replacing the joy of being a comics fan with the joy (and occasional pain) of being a comics creator. It might not be the best idea anymore to jump on the internet and talk smack about artists that you don't like. And if someone talks smack about you, consider letting it slide. By the same token, if someone praises your work, accept it gracefully; don't mumble about its shortcomings.

Don't sell yourself or your work short. You and your time have value. Don't do work "for exposure." Most importantly, respect others and expect the same from them.



Be personal.

Some comics publishers used to tell their artists to draw like other artists; they had to conform to a “house style”. There is still a lot of uniformity in some genres of comics today. It’s sad.

Write and draw what matters to you, and what you care about. Anybody can write and draw their Batman fan fiction - and many people do. That can be a fine place to start.

But no one else is you. No one else can tell your story or present your point of view in your style. Instead of trying to figure out how to be the next Matt Fraction or Fiona Staples, figure out how to be the one and only you.



Create your system.

Develop a system that keeps you working and productive. Some people are most productive when they can zone in on one task at a time, start to finish. Others (like me) prefer to have multiple irons in the fire at different stages of completion.

I won't go into the details my own system here, as it is regularly evolving depending on my schedule and goals, but one constant part of it is this:

I try to spend as much time creating things as I do consuming things.



Understand yourself.

Easier said than done, right? But it's worth asking yourself some questions, such as:

1. What do you want out of making comics? Fame? Fortune? To make a living, or to pursue a hobby? There's no "right" answer to this: just what is right for you.
2. Are you a specialist or an auteur? Would you rather concentrate on one aspect of making comics, like inking, or do you like to do as many of the jobs as possible?
3. If you could will any comic into existence, what would it be? **Why aren't you working on it right now?**



Stay healthy.

Take care of your physical and mental health. It is very discouraging to have to put your comics on hold because you worked so hard on them that you developed (for example) a repetitive stress injury. Depending on your work setup and habits, it might be worth consulting an occupational therapist or ergonomics specialist.

As for mental health, everyone has issues, and some are quite serious. Some people find making comics therapeutic; but artistic endeavours can also dredge up things that we haven't really dealt with. In such cases, you should consider reaching out to friends, family, a therapist - whatever helps.



Don't wait for permission.

Don't wait for someone to give you permission to make comics. Just make them, and keep making them, for as long as you want to.

Don't get discouraged by bad reviews, by "dry spells" where you are less productive, by anything. If you want to take a break, go ahead. Regroup, refocus, and get back at it when you're ready.

No such thing as spare time. No such thing as free time. No such thing as down time. All you got is life time. Go.

- Henry Rollins

Recommended Reading

The following is a list of books that I have personally found to be useful. I'm sure there are many more, so please don't hesitate to contact me with suggestions.

- *Understanding Comics, Reinventing Comics*, and especially *Making Comics* by Scott McCloud
- *Comics and Sequential Art, Graphic Storytelling, and Shop Talk* by Will Eisner
- *Perspective for Comic Book Artists* by David Chelsea
- *Directing the Story* by Francis Glebas
- *Dynamic Anatomy* by Burne Hogarth
- *Freehand Figure Drawing for Illustrators* by David H. Ross
- *The Human Figure* by John H. Vanderpoel
- *Treasury of Graphic Techniques* by Tom Porter and Sue Goodman
- *The Art of Comic Book Inking* by Gary Martin
- *How To Draw Comics the Marvel Way* by Stan Lee and John Buscema (get the video too, if you can)
- *On Writing* by Stephen King
- *The Cerebus Guide to Self-Publishing* by Dave Sim
- *The Graphic Artists Guild Handbook: Pricing and Ethical Guidelines* (graphicartistsguild.org)

Tools and Resources

- Your local library!
- *Make It, Then Tell Everybody* - a podcast by Dan Berry (makeitthentelleverybody.com)
- Blambot fonts (blambot.com)
- Adobe Color Creative Cloud
- Google Sketchup
- Manga Studio, plus tutorials by Doug Hills and brushes by Ray Frenden. Frenden also does excellent reviews of graphics tools at his website.
- Scrivener, an excellent application for writing scripts and other long-form works
- Evernote, a cross-platform notes application with many optional plugins
- Dickblick.com art supplies



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