GRAPHIC NOVELS: TRIMMING TEXT
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It's been a while since I shared anything about graphic novels so I thought it might be time to put something up on the site again. And since I'm in the midst of cleaning up a graphic novel at the same time I'd like to share something that many writers new to the format often have some trouble with. That is having too much and even needless dialogue in a panel.

Americana was the first real graphic novel I wrote. I had been tooling around with some comics book scripts when I was younger but nothing really came of them. *Americana*, however, was my first real effort in making something work and doing so long term at that. Today it is part of a graphic novel trilogy but over eleven years ago I was just trying to figure out how to tell a story in graphic novel form. And like many venturing out into said waters for the first time, I made my share of mistakes.

What made it a bit more challenging was that I was coming from the prose background. I knew how to write books but that is not always the same skill set you need in comic and graphic novel work. And this showed up quite often and early on (as it does for many who take to writing graphic novels for the first time) as having too much and even needless text in the panels.

So what does that mean? Well, there is only so much space you can have to place text in each panel. In comics you have to have room for the art and show what is going on. Because graphic novels are visual mediums for telling stories you don't need the text to set up what is going on. You see it. So that just leaves the text for sound effects and dialogue/internal monologue.

As already mentioned, the dialogue is where new people often get a little carried away until they learn better. Not all of what we think has to be said needs to be said or even in the way it's said. Here it would be better to look at the work as something closer to writing plays, skits, or screenplays. It is really more about an economy of words that helps to define character and the pacing of what is said in line with the images shown.

This is just another way of saying there is a rhythm to how text should flow from panel to panel so that it works hand in hand with each panel and page to tell a story. Now, in *Americana* I have some places of longer dialogue being expressed—speeches are made and such—but there I have just one whole page or larger panels to handle it. But even still I don't have this being the norm for the story, which is more or less short conversations between various characters to establish their personalities, drive the story forward, and even do a little bit of world building in the process.

Often new writers start writing a graphic novel or comic thinking they have to put in every exchange and try and make it as jammed packed as possible in each panel. The idea being that if you don't put it down somehow the reader will be confused or the story will suffer. But the more you get practice on the matter and look to other examples you'll see that in many causes simple is better. And sometimes no words need be spoken at all to get something across.

Let me give you an example of what I'm talking about. Below is a older sample of some pages from *Americana: Smoke and Mirrors*, followed by the revised pages. See if you can notice any differences and the effect they had on the work over all insofar as character development, pacing, plot, flow, etc. are concerned.

OLDER VERSION
PAGE ONE (1 Panel)

Panel 1. *Full Page Panel.* We are in a cryogenics lab. It is pretty much like a high tech hidden bunker lab area with medical and technological devices. The two characters we have in this panel are in modern dress: circa 2004 or so. One is a lab tech the other is a man in a business suit, whose face is being reflected back at him from the glass of a cyropod he is leaning over.

      This man is a middle aged and has a very serious and stern look about him as if he's been modeled for politics. To many readers he should look like "Joe Politician" here. The lab tech is checking his clipboard and is paging through the many documents affixed to it. We see this panel from behind the two men (the tech is behind the suited man) from over the shoulders of both.

1. SUITED MAN:
ARE YOU **SURE** THIS WILL KEEP?

2. LAB TECH:
POSITIVE. HE'LL BE **FRESH** UNTIL WE **CRACK** THE SEAL.

3. SUITED MAN:
HOW MANY WE GOT SET UP NOW?

4. LAB TECH:
CLOSE TO 10,000.

5. SUITED MAN:
EXCELLENT. WE SHOULD REACH OUR GOAL IN THE NEXT FEW MONTHS.

6. LAB TECH:
THAT'S THE IDEA, SIR.

7. LAB TECH:
THE PENTAGON WANTS TO BE **DROWNING** IN THEM.

PAGE TWO (4 Panels)

Panel 1. We get closer to the glass in our own view now in this panel and can see inside the cyropod rests Scott in his boxer briefs and other trappings of cryogenic existence (see me for details on this). We concentrate upon his face more so than the rest of the frame in the cyropod device. He seems to be at peaceful rest like we are looking at him during a wake or some similar affair.

1. SUITED MAN:
I CAN'T **WAIT** TO TRY THESE BOYS OUT.

2. SUITED MAN:
WE'LL BE **UNSTOPPABLE!**

Panel 2. The lab tech adjusts his glasses as he speaks from behind the suited man who has turned his head to look at the tech with an expression of surprise at his statement.

3. LAB TECH:
I HOPE WE NEVER **HAVE** TO USE THEM.

4. LAB TECH:
WORLD'S CRAZY ENOUGH AS IT IS.

5. SUITED MAN:
IT DOESN'T HURT TO HAVE A **FAIL SAFE**.

Panel 3. We face them as they are walking towards us. The lights are dimming and some other light sources are coming on, like little night lights, small lights on the computers and equipment, etc. Together they walk right towards us as they speak.

6. SUITED MAN:
SO YOU **REALLY** THINK THESE GUYS WILL BE THE ANSWER?

7. LAB COAT:
THEY COULD BE... IF USED PROPERLY.

8. SUITED MAN:
USED PROPERLY?

9. LAB COAT:
IT'S MY UNDERSTANDING THESE SOLDIERS WERE TO BE **TOOLS** TO **SAVE** LIVES.

Panel 4. The panel shows us a medium close up of the cyropod itself now as the lights dim down even further. We can see the form of Scott asleep in there still looking peaceful as the two men are speaking as they leave.

10. CAPTION:
EXPENSIVE TOOLS, DOC.

11. CAPTION:
BUT IF IT KEEPS AMERICAN LIVES SAFE I'M ALL FOR IT.

REVISED PAGES
PAGE ONE (1 Panel)

Panel 1. *Full Page Panel*. We are in a cryogenics lab. It is pretty much like a high tech hidden bunker lab area with medical and technological devices. The two characters we have in this panel are in modern dress: circa 2004 or so. One is a lab tech the other is a man in a business suit, whose face is being reflected back at him from the glass of a cyropod he is leaning over.

       This man is a middle aged and has a very serious and stern look about him as if he's been modeled for politics. To many readers he should look like "Joe Politician" here. The lab tech is checking his clipboard and is paging through the many documents affixed to it. We see this panel from behind the two men (the tech is behind the suited man) from over the shoulders of both.

 1. SUITED MAN:
YOU **SURE** THIS'LL KEEP?

2. LAB TECH:
EVEN WITH BACKUP POWER HE'LL BE AROUND FOR **DECADES.**

3. SUITED MAN:
AND HOW MANY YOU GOT NOW?

4. LAB TECH:
CLOSE TO 10,000.

PAGE TWO (4 Panels)

Panel 1. We get closer to the glass in our own view now in this panel and can see inside the cyropod rests Scott in his boxer briefs and other trappings of cryogenic existence (see me for details on this). We concentrate upon his face more so than the rest of the frame in the cyropod device. He seems to be at peaceful rest like we are looking at him during a wake or some similar affair.

1. SUITED MAN:
THEY BETTER BE WORTH EVERY PENNY.

2. SUITED MAN:
I PUSHED FOR THIS PROJECT PRETTY HARD.

Panel 2. The lab tech adjusts his glasses as he speaks from behind the suited man who has turned his head to look at the tech with an expression of surprise at his statement.

3. LAB TECH:
WE ALL DID, SIR, BUT I STILL HOPE WE DON'T HAVE TO USE THEM.

4. SUITED MAN:
WE'RE TALKING BILLIONS HERE.

5. SUITED MAN:
I, AND REST OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE, WOULD LIKE TO MAKE SURE IT WAS MONEY WELL SPENT.

Panel 3. We face them as they are walking towards us. The lights are dimming and some other light sources are coming on, like little night lights, small lights on the computers and equipment, etc. Together they walk right towards us as they speak.

6. LAB COAT:
WHEN THE NEXT WAR COMES YOU'LL SEE IT WAS.

7. SUITED MAN:
I SURE HOPE SO.

Panel 4. The panel shows us a medium close up of the cyropod itself now as the lights dim down even further. We can see the form of Scott asleep in there still looking peaceful as the two men are speaking as they leave.

8. SUITED MAN (CAPTION):
I TOOK ENOUGH HEAT FOR EVEN **AUTHORIZING** THE PROJECT, IT'D BE GOOD TO BE FINALLY VINDICATED WHEN THEY HIT THE FIELD.

9. SUITED MAN (CAPTION):
LET'S ME LEAVE A LEGACY TOO—SOMETHING GOOD FOR THE FUTURE…

Now, I'm aware you don't know much about the story to get a clear idea of what is going on just yet, but this is a good example of how some simple changes can make for a different feel for the work and convey a different message over all. The editing done changes the characters a little bit and shows a bit more of the story as well, all without having unneeded text cluttering things up in the panel.

I could have showed a more drastic example but I think you get the idea of what I'm talking about. There is more character distinction and development in terms of voice and mindset and the unneeded exchanges have been eliminated, making for more readable and relatable dialogue and story.

So that's it for now. I'll see about adding some more on this topic again in the near future.