

Dialogue and Other Words: Pacing in an Illustrated Storybook

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The great thing about writing dialogue for an illustrated book is that it directly informs the pacing of the story, much like in a screenplay. Let's take a deeper look at how we use *words* and *page-turning* to establish how a story should be read.

One trick that storybook writers get to use that other writers cannot is taking dialogue and removing it from the primary text. Short bits of dialogue can be moved into the spotlight by placing the words directly on a panel.

We usually think of this sort of thing when it comes to comic books and graphic novels. This is where we

see talk bubbles or sound effects like, “POW!” But that isn’t what I mean here.

In an illustrated storybook, we can place dialogue right next to the character speaking. No talk bubble is needed – the only necessity is that the dialogue be really brief, not more than two sentences.

3 Hits using 3 different types

[Charlie Hits It Big by Deborah Blumenthal and Denise Brunkus](#) is a modern coming-of-age tale for a guinea pig, and a favorite story for kids. The story reads very cinematically (which works, as it’s about a guinea pig who heads out to L.A. to be a movie star), and it uses key moments of dialogue directly on its panels, **sometimes even using words of dialogue as a key visual on the page.**

It’s fantastic, because it really gives the dialogue space and shows the reader very plainly how they should deliver the line when they read the book to someone. This technique is very effective because it heightens the reading-rhythm of the book.

A strong example of this is [The Book with No Pictures by B.J. Novak](#). This book really has no pictures at all, but it uses the words in a pictorial way. Using different colors and fonts and sizes, the words are written the way they should be spoken.

I’m not suggesting you make all your dialogue look flashy or graphic, but it is an option you can think about using if it fits the style (or mood) you want to achieve. (Note: if you’re working on a series, whatever decision you make on this point should remain consistent [throughout that particular series](#).)

A really sweet example of simple dialogue being placed directly on the panel is [Plant a Kiss by Amy Krouse Rosenthal and illustrated by Peter H. Reynolds](#). The font used throughout the entire book looks as though someone simply wrote the words directly on the pictures.

That isn’t how the book was made, but that’s how it looks and feels: simple. That visual style of the words reflects the simplicity of the story itself.

Between Two Panels.

You can have a character call out to another one: “Cinderella!” Directly on the picture, and continue the story below the picture (or perhaps between panels), like this [for more about panels, [go here](#)]:

PAGE 8

Cinderella!

<PANEL ONE: To the left, one step-sister tosses dirty laundry up into the air, yelling out for Cinderella with her nose pointing up and her tongue wiggling from the vibration.>

The evil step-sisters didn’t just call for poor Cinderella, they would scream out her name in high-pitched voices that made the walls quiver. What did they want? It was always the same. They had more chores for

Cinderella.

Cinderella!

<**PANEL TWO:** to the right, the other step-sister pushes her messy breakfast tray away from her as she reclines in bed, screaming for Cinderella, about to apply lipstick as the evil cat holds up a handmirror.>

This could be done as a single page or a full-spread, depending on how much importance you want to place on this part of the story. The key here is to keep a single piece of the story to a single page. When you want to provide more information, it might be time to turn the page.

This is one of the key ways we can pace the story. When you want the reader to pause, if you want an idea to have more weight or consideration, provide the opportunity to turn to the next page.

Using Three Panels.

You can also pace the story by adding more panels (pictures) to a page. This is often done to show small examples of typical actions. For example, when you want to explain the status quo for a protagonist, you might want to slow down the pace and give that action a little time (without giving [pages and pages](#) to it). You can do that like this:

PAGE 6 (Left-side of an open book)

As Christmas Break approached, Jenny Juniper was always in trouble. She was misbehaving all the time. You wouldn't believe all the things she was doing.

She started eating way too much and in her room, which was not allowed at all.

<**PANEL ONE:** Jenny stands on her bed, holding an ice cream cone with 26 balls of ice cream dangerously teetering.>

She stopped doing her homework.

<**PANEL TWO:** Jenny at her desk, secretly playing an electronic game, as a giant heap of books and paperwork pile up on the floor behind her. An army of ants use the tower of books to build an ant farm.>

She suddenly started arguing with her little sister for even the tiniest little thing.

<**PANEL THREE:** Jenny holds her doll away from her sister, stretched tall leaning over severely, mouth wide as she yells angrily at her sister, who is impertinent – eyes closed - and standing with her hands on her hips.>

Here's what you might have on the next page - the one that faces those three panels.

PAGE 7 (Right-side)

So it can really be no surprise that Jenny Juniper was in trouble with her doctor,

<PANEL ONE: Jenny stands slumped on a scale as the doctor wags his finger at her.>

her teacher,

<PANEL TWO: Jenny stands in class, her arms up - resigned because she has no homework to turn in. Her cheeks are red. The other kids look angelic. The teacher stands at the front of class, wagging her finger at Jenny.>

and worst of all, her mommy.

<PANEL THREE: Jenny stands slumped, as her mommy stands upset, wagging her finger at her. Behind Mommy is Jenny's little sister, sticking her tongue out at Jenny.>

We've established what Jenny is doing wrong (what she'll need to change somehow), in two sets of three panels, so that we can quickly take in a lot of action in a simple, uncomplicated way. Doing this shows that these particulars aren't so important as the fact that they exist. The over-arching problem: Jenny is purposefully neglecting her responsibilities as Christmastime nears.

Now it's time for the next [stage in the story](#). At this point, Jenny needs to face a turning point, one that will make her realize that she needs to make a change.

Because this is an important moment, it should have a fresh page.

Turning the Page.

PAGE 8-9 (Full Spread)

One day, even Granny was upset with Jenny. She said Santa might put her on the Naughty List this year because Jenny kept avoiding her responsibilities. It was time for that to stop.

Oh no.

<PANEL ONE: Granny and Jenny sit on a sofa together. Granny looks very stern and Jenny is stricken with grief that her Granny is upset with her - her eyes are wide open, welling with tears, her arms grasping onto the sofa's edge.>

[NOTE: This is a single panel spread across two pages.]

This is when Jenny realizes that she needs to make a change, and that's a big deal. For this particular character, that's a turning point (it could be earlier established that her favorite person in the world is Granny to give the moment more import), so this is a good time to turn the page.

If there's something important happening, it's definitely time to turn the page. The turning point for

Jenny is particular to Jenny's character. For another character, this moment might not be that big a deal - it might just be another bit of rising action. As the writer, you get to make those decisions and delineations.

Don't Count Words

Don't make the mistake of counting words to determine where the next page break should be. Your story won't flow, because the breaks won't make sense. What's important is the function of what's happening on the page. You must ask yourself, "What stage of the story does this page need to serve?"

There is no cut-and-dry answer to that question. As you form the storyline, you get to decide what the function should be. There are general guides, basic forms for rising and falling action. I'll be writing more about that, but here's some heavy soup on [plot structure](#), how [character affects plot](#), and what [drives plot](#).

PAGE 10 (Left-side)

Jenny realized she needed to make a change. In fact, she needed to make several changes. But it wasn't going to be easy.

<PANEL ONE: Jenny stands in the doorway of her chaotic bedroom. Flies are buzzing around her bed and the cat is napping on top of her homework.>

You could make this a full spread, to really give that moment some pause, or you can keep it to the single page on the left. That means Jenny's first step (or steps) towards change would then *face* the Turning Point page.

Whether the story components (like Turning Point, First Step, etc.) face each other or not depends on the kind of importance you want to place on those moments of the story and how connected you want them to feel in the telling of the story.

PAGE 11 (Right-side, facing the Turning Point)

Jenny was going to have to face one of her biggest fears: the dark basement. That's where the vacuum cleaner was hidden.

<PANEL ONE: Jenny stands tentatively at the top of the basement stairs. She shakily reaches for the light switch.>

Sometimes, Jenny was sure that the vacuum cleaner came down, down, down into the dark just because it's the one place Jenny wanted to avoid. Everyone knew that, even the vacuum cleaner.

<PANEL TWO: Jenny slowly descends the basement stairs. The vacuum glows from a distant, darkened corner.>

You're coming with me!

<**PANEL THREE:** Jenny grabs the vacuum by the neck.>

I would put the page turn here, but you could alter the timing by bringing the following panel up to this page (keeping it to page 11 instead of page 12). Read it again - aloud - and see if you can't hear the difference. Imagine turning the page in your mind, and how that impacts what is seen and read.

PAGE 12 (Left-side)

<**PANEL ONE:** Triumphant, Jenny drags the vacuum into her room. It struggles to get away. It doesn't want to be in her disgusting room.>

Think with Purpose, Write with Purpose.

Keep your pacing simple by dividing the moments of the story into smaller pieces. Determine what that piece of the story has to be about, and then write to that purpose.

Doing this for an illustrated storybook will hone your writing abilities in general, because as the writer you're forced to think in the stripped-down, purpose-heavy type of writing that an illustrated book requires.

Don't just think about snappy dialogue, think about the many ways that little bit of dialogue can serve the story. What are its functions? I'll be writing more about this. Sign up for my newsletter, and I'll send it right to you.

What are your writing woes? Write below, let me know – or just send me an email. I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Stick with it, stay on it, stay true to it, and then get it out there.

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