

Plotting Panels: Planning the Layout for Your Visual Story

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<http://greatstorybook.com/plotting-panels-pre-preparing-your-visual-story/>

This entry is part 5 of 5 in the series [Format Essentials](#)

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*Deciding not only what images but how many and where on the page they might go can quickly become an overwhelming, hair-pulling task. It takes **planning** – but how do you pre-plan images without actually creating printer-ready artwork that might, in the end, need to be scrapped?*

This simple 2-step process makes your life as a writer much, much simpler. You can keep your hair - no need to pull it all out.

This is a two-step process, and while it may seem like “extra work” or “additional steps” it will actually make the process much smoother, simpler, and more time efficient.

Think about writing a novel: no novelist ever sits down and simply starts writing [from page one](#) without any kind of plan or idea of story structure and keeps going all the way to the end. Trying to do so would be a nightmare. You’d lose track of the storyline, forget details, and you’d either derail completely or hit a wall about half way through chapter five.

Avoiding this catastrophe is easy, but involves the steps of [creating character profiles](#), life lines, the “A” and “B” story plots, establishing theme, and chapter outlines. Once these steps are done, then you start writing actual chapters.

This is similarly the case with the two steps I'm going to explain here, the steps you need to do before creating finished pages for an illustrated storybook. In these steps, you can

1. test the tempo of your story,
2. play with how your panels will be laid upon the page, and
3. try different angles for the images to see what is more effective and you can do this using Panel Layout Plans (PLPs).

First, let's talk about panels in general and why we would use them at all.

This is an example PLP, a classic panel template you can use directly or tweak it to better suit your story. Free Downloadables below.

Download Panel Layout Plans

What's a Panel?

A panel is essentially an illustration, sometimes with a box (or frame) around it. You utilize panel plotting for comics, graphic novels, illustrated stories, and in film they're used as well – but in that profession it's called [storyboarding](#).

Look through some of your favorite storybooks and you'll find there are all sorts of layouts currently being used. There might be several illustrations on a single page, used most frequently to indicate:

- a series of emotive reactions
- listed things of importance (as with *The Gruffalo* in above example)
- quick action sequences

Show What's Important

For an excellent example of how to layout the interior of a storybook, take a look inside [The Gruffalo](#) by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler. Some of the images take up a two-page spread. Some are a single page - or a bit smaller to fit more text.

But whenever [the Mouse describes](#) the Gruffalo and lists certain parts of his terrible body, we get several little pictures, like bullets: bang, bang, bang.

- Terrible tusks,
- terrible claws,
- and terrible jaws. These are *important*, so they each get a picture.

Depicting Action in Panels

Take a look at this great action sequence from the beautifully illustrated [Charming Opal](#) by Holly Hobbie. Many of the panels are fully illustrated pages, filling every bit of the page with color, but on this page of the same book we see one of the main characters diving into the water to save a tooth.

Here are three panels on one page, all on white, and though I've trimmed it out here, the text fits directly underneath these panels.

Establish Tone and Pacing

Dudley Bakes A Cake by [Peter Cross](#) and Judy Taylor is a particularly special book because it uses both images and text in an artful manner to support the very sweet story. In it, Dudley the dormouse enters a cake competition in hopes of winning a bicycle. The bicycle is fancy, and so its individual parts each get a picture: the tires, the saddle, the brakes, the lamp, and the bell.

Many pages of the book are exceptionally planned. For example, on this last page of the story, **the layout of the closing words informs us how to read them.** It's brilliant.

What About Wordless Books

It's worth pointing out that it is absolutely okay to have a picture and no text at all. You can even have several pictures *without any text* if you feel that it works or has more impact that way.

[Wordless books](#) have been done with success (for quality work, check out [Zoom](#) and its sequel [Re-Zoom](#) by Istvan Banyai from Picture Puffins), but even with amazing artistry, there is this sense of a deeply felt lack when there is nothing at all to read.

In [Where The Wild Things Are](#) by Maurice Sendak, my favorite image in the book is a full two-page spread, the one where all the monsters are dancing. There are no words at all. I very much appreciate the exquisite illustration shown uninterrupted, but my daughter always urges me to READ when we reach that page.

There is nothing to read, so she and I sit next to each other and make stuff up. While this is fun and creativity-inducing, it isn't helpful in getting her ready for bed, so it means I read it less than other books that cheerily help the story along by providing me with words.

An example of a multi-panel two-page spread. HOW MANY panels do you count? This is a large middle panel framed with a series of smaller ones.

Illustrated storybooks are a visual medium, and as the story progresses both visually and verbally, planning how the visuals might keep things moving along will keep your storybook more compelling.

Panels help pace the images as well as inform the layout of the book.

As you work through the process of planning panels, you may well find that a couple of images you originally had in mind aren't all that effective, and that instead other images – and perhaps *more* panels – communicate the story better.

You never know until you actually start playing around with the panels. You've got to [mock up your storybook](#), but play with it. Move things around and see what really works best. Be flexible.

First Step

In planning panels for a storybook, you do this after you have already written the text. You want to keep an open mind to making story changes at this stage. This step is when you will generally see what edits are needed to make the story flow better. Why? When you match the words up with a visual, it changes the words.

In outlining and planning how images should roughly look and what text should share that space with the image or images, it's extremely helpful to plan the story panel by panel before you start creating final drafts of artwork.

Start with the first page of your manuscript and block it out bit by bit, dividing the story into the segments where you feel it's a logical and necessary place for an image.

Start with a Super Simple List

At this point, you're only making a list - a sort of table of contents - of where images should interrupt the text and what the the images should reveal to support the text. You can, however, start to make rough (read: Paleolithic) sketches if it helps you envision perspective, scale and other drafting options for the images.

Think of it as line-drawn storyboarding.

Keep going with it, panel by panel, breaking it down into images and words. But what next? Next, you need to plan how these images will fit onto the page, how they will best interact with each other - and whether they should share space with another image or two, or more.

This is an excellent example of using Two Horizontal Panels - in this case, spread across two pages. The text is swept-up with the images, a wonderfully thoughtful layout.

Second Step

There is no computer program to help with this kind of work, at least none that I could find. However, I have created a few simple **Panel Layout Plans (PLPs)** you can download and print. These are based on classic layouts you find in illustrated books.

Just taking a look at these layout options might inspire you (that's my hope!). I've created a set for rectangular and another set for square-shaped books.

Let me know how you do with these. Write below, let me know - or, as ever, write me an email. You know I love getting those!

Download Panel Layout Plans

Keep creating, no matter what.//

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