

THE DEFINITIVE FREE GUIDE

# How To Get Your Graphic Novel Published

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## Introduction

What do you want?

Fame, money, success, power, or satisfaction?

I've thought long and hard about that question during my career. I think that fame usually brings a lot of money, and certainly, success can bring both money and power. However, what about satisfaction?

I think if it is used in the right way, satisfaction brings all of the aforementioned and a colossal amount of money. If you look at the success stories of people such as Steve Jobs, Bill Gates and their ilk – they were never really in it for the money.

Those chosen few, the great creative talents of our time, all seem to be motivated by satisfaction. They want to be successful, and they certainly want a lot of money, but what defines them is their passion for what they do. Apply passion to any career, and you can expect success of some kind to come along.

How can you become successful at being a published author, particularly in a field where the money is often not that great?

You need to have a colossal amount of love for comics and graphic novels, but even that is not enough.

You will need to devote yourself to the study of writing, grammar, and even marketing.

In the age of the Kindle and the tablet computer, the writer is now a one-man-band. He may write, possibly also illustrate, and even do his marketing. In the twenty-first century, writers are becoming the ultimate entrepreneurs.

In competitive times, one needs an advantage. What is it that you can do that no one else seems to have considered? Sure, you can write and perhaps designing a book cover is no big deal for you. What topic should you add to your list in your quest to break into comics and graphic novel publishing?

How about knowing what the publishers think about their writers? Not just the successful writers, but the newcomers knocking on the door and trying to sell their first script? In an ideal world, you would be able to know the culture and way of thinking in a publishing house.

Look in a dictionary, and you'll find culture and way of thinking are described as one single word: mindset.

This book provides insight, for writers, as to the mindset of a publishing organisation. Within this book, I will enable the reader to understand the way that editors, artists, desktop publishers, and marketing people think.

As a published writer and editor, I want to share my experiences with you in the best way that I can. I also want to show you an area of publishing that does not seem to have been covered in other books.

I am often asked why publishing houses seem to be harder to break into than banks. Many writers will also ask me a variety of questions, the most popular of which seems to be: why will they not even read

my material?

What some writers should be asking is what goes on inside the publishing house? What are office politics? What happens to an editor once he agrees to try and publish my material? How can I ensure my work is published on time and resembles the material I originally submitted?

To become truly successful in publishing, understanding the culture and the way that a publishing house operates is of prime importance. If you are constantly sending your writing out, but not even receiving a reply then what I have to offer will be of great help.

For those simply wanting to know more about graphic novel publishing, this book also intends to provide a short, but firm, grasp of the basics.

If this book succeeds: writers will understand the mindset of publishers, and will be forewarned of potential problems and how to avoid them.

Each chapter of the book examines a process of graphic novel production, there are also personal accounts of what can make some processes difficult to complete. I will not stick to a rigid format for every process, but list issues that prevent most writers from having successful careers.

The issues mentioned also shed some light on the internal problems that publishers have. Even if you are a fantastic writer, the office politics within a publishing house may mean your work is never printed. The overall framework of this book is to provide not only an understanding of graphic novel publishing but also a guide to the minefield of the writer and publisher relationship. I've included many examples from my own life in publishing. Please note that I have not named any publishers or colleagues directly, and

once you have read the book, I am sure you will understand the reasons for that.

In the following chapters, the tone of this book will be informal. I feel that potential writers need a friendlier and less bureaucratic tone than that which they often receive from publishers. I do not intend this book to be taken as a scathing or bitter memoir. That is not the intention of this volume. Some of the stories and details may seem turbulent, but that is what goes with the territory. I find working in the publishing industry to have been the most satisfying working hours of my life.

For those of you who succeed in placing your work, you will enter a profession that not only stimulates your interests but rewards them. As a disclaimer, the business of publishing is often unpleasant. You will be working with, and against, some fairly ruthless characters. I have listed the many different types of editors who exist behind the rosy facade of the publishing house editorial department.

The overview of this business, I offer, may surprise you. You will see that the complete publishing process is sometimes difficult, often political, but very satisfying.

I hope you enjoy this book, and that you learn a great deal from it. Probably, the most important thing you can learn is the complex etiquette between writers and publishers.

Please note that this volume is in British English, but my next work might just be in American English. I shed light on the reasons for that within this book. If you are a British writer, then I will show you why it may be worth your while to invest in an American English dictionary. That not only refers to being published in America but in many other countries across the world.

## And One More Thing...

As an extra, a sort of special bonus feature, I am also going to offer you a glimpse into the world of graphic novel production in Asia. I've been there and spent some time working within a culture that is vastly different from that of Western graphic novel publishers.

My reason for including my experience within Asia is that in looking to the future of graphic novel production, I think you will see the emergence and continuing growth of new companies throughout Asia. For those of you in the West looking to gain experience in the field of comic and graphic novel publishing, Asia could be a very welcoming host.

Before we examine each piece of your journey as a published writer, let's define the format we are dealing with.

## What Is A Graphic Novel?

A graphic novel is a comic that contains one complete story. Many graphic novels are indeed sequels to existing works, and they contain the same characters and locations. However, the story should be new and complete. A graphic novel is not a weekly continuation of the same ongoing story, which you might find at a comic shop. In a graphic novel, the story should always be resolved.

## How Are Graphic Novels Made?

Each publishing company will have its own set of processes, but the list below contains the basics which

most companies must follow.

## Pre-Production

1. The writer has an idea they feel could be developed into a graphic novel.
2. To save time, the writer should then examine the current marketplace to see which publishing house might give their idea a warm welcome.
3. Having identified a suitable publishing house, the writer should carefully read the company's submission procedures. Usually, the initial process is to send the publisher a two-page synopsis explaining the storyline from beginning to end. The synopsis process is often misunderstood by the novice writer (I offer tips and suggestions in a later chapter). Accompanying the synopsis should be an introductory letter highlighting any work the writer has previously published, and an outline (usually a paragraph) summarising the writer's idea for the graphic novel.
4. If the publisher is impressed by the writer's introduction, and synopsis (the publisher may ask for the synopsis to be redrafted several times) the writer will be asked to send what is known as a page by page breakdown. This is where the writer must describe what happens on each page of the graphic novel. Most publishers pay nothing for the page by page breakdown. Despite no monetary benefits, the writer should apply himself well to this process. A good page by page breakdown will save the writer, and editor, a lot of work in the long run. If the writer wants to save themselves even more time, they should ask the publisher if they have guide sheets for their categories of fiction (history, mythology, classics etc.), and a style guide that can be studied. A

writer who carefully follows the publishing house's style guide, should not be surprised if their editor falls in love with them. Such love comes with a token of great affection: more work.

5. Once the writer and editor are happy with the final page breakdown, a contract for the script will be offered to the writer. The writer should read through this document carefully, it will cover issues such as payment, what is expected of the writer, and if the rights to the work will revert to the writer, should the book go out of print.

## Production

6. The writer will then work closely with their appointed editor, and will hopefully produce a script that is deemed good enough to be passed to the art department for illustration.
7. Once the assigned artist receives the script and any reference images (pictures of locations and characters), they will consider what visual style will suit the story. Ideally, there should be a meeting between the artist and editor before the illustration begins. Hopefully, both parties will be happy with the chosen style.
8. The artist will then sketch *thumbnails* (so-called as some artists produce sketches no bigger than a thumbnail) of all the pages. Suppose the book is ninety-seven pages, then ninety-seven pages will be created in miniature so that the artist can get a rough idea of how the book will look.
9. From here, the artist will produce *roughs*, full-size drawings of every page. For the artist, there are now two ways they will progress. They will either erase all the rough lines of the drawings



until a detailed page is realised, or the artist will redraw the final page from scratch, achieving the quality finish they are seeking.

10. The completed artwork will then be scanned, page by page, into a computer. Most colouring is now done digitally in modern graphic novel production using the appropriate software.
11. Once the colouring is complete, a letterer will begin to place dialogue balloons and captions. The dialogue balloon, or bubble, is the spoken text of the characters, and normally points towards their mouths. Captions are small square boxes, whose text gives information such as a location and date or serves as the internal narration of a character. Lettering is still done by hand but, to save time, most publishers would rather have letterers complete the work digitally. This means the letterer can cut and paste text, directly from the writer's script, into the dialogue balloons they have created.

## Post-Production

12. Now lettered, the graphic novel should end up in the hands of the desktop publishing staff. They will combine all ninety-seven pages of the story, together with a front and back cover, inner pages, a title for the spine of the book, and smaller, but no less important, details such as barcodes.
13. Now a printing company (internal or external) will send a sample mock copy of the graphic novel to the editorial department. The book will be checked for printer's errors (image blur, colouring, and line issues) and the last-minute check on grammar and spelling should be undertaken. If possible, it is highly recommended to include a good copy editor at this stage. When everyone is

happy, the printers will complete a first print run. Dependent on the needs of the publisher, this can be anywhere from two thousand copies upwards.

14. If the marketing team have successfully advertised the graphic novel's launch date with posters, social networking and perhaps a good party, then the general public will know the book's release date and will be eagerly awaiting it.

15. Once the books have been delivered to the distributors, they will then deliver them to the high street and online book stores.

Is it so simple?

Not always...

## The Problem Of Compromise

A hot country in Asia, 2009.

I am sitting in a private office. It is a small corner that sits within a large room that is occupied by no more than twenty people. The private office is referred to as "private" as it is composed of two temporary walls bolted together.

There is nothing private about the private office.

What we, the editor-in-chief, artist and I, are talking about can be heard very clearly by everyone on the first floor of the building. At this moment there is also a power cut, and the strong humidity is beginning to seep into the building.

The heat is not bothering me, but the feeling of forced compromise is. The artist, once again, repeats the same phrase he has used throughout our discussion: “I am not making changes.”

I calmly, and respectfully, point out that he has made thirty-nine changes to a script that is an adaptation of a historical novel. As the artist on the project, he has taken a few too many liberties. The result is that the ninety-seven illustrated pages, for the graphic novel, do not match the script that I have spent many months working on.

As an example, on one page we see the main character in a church, planning out their battle strategy. Instead, what has been illustrated is the main character standing in a field. This is one of the smaller discrepancies between the script I have edited and the illustrated pages the artist has produced.

All artists should be given creative freedom, but consider that an entire book full of illustrations does not match the script, which was carved from a thousand-page book.

“I am not making changes,” repeats the artist, smiling at both myself and the editor-in-chief. There is another factor, outside of this argument, which makes me understand that we are not going to make any progress in this discussion. This particular artist is beloved by the family which owns the company. For that reason, this artist will always win out.

When the artist is promoted to the status of art director, later in the year, all of my projects will incur

similar delays.

The editor-in-chief closes the discussion by asking the artist to make some changes at least. Two months will pass by and no changes will have been implemented.

Later, and without my knowledge, our letterers will place the text from the script onto the unchanged artwork. One morning, I am summoned to a meeting between a company director and the aforementioned artist.

The discussion centres on the fact that the text does not match the artwork and the dialogue balloons cannot be read in the correct order. I advise the director that there is a problem with the artwork not matching the script, but also that there are no panel borders in some parts of the book, which is making it impossible to know which dialogue balloon to read first.

The director gives the artist a list of changes. Another two months pass by, and none of these changes has been made. The book languishes in the art department and disappears from my sight.

Following this outcome, I discuss the situation with the editor-in-chief. We consider our options and decide to approach the scriptwriter to undertake a rewrite. The writer refuses to amend the story unless he is paid again. He has every right to this request, but as we are a small publishing house we cannot justify the expense.

Eventually, I decided to rewrite the story to match the artwork to ensure the graphic novel makes it to the printers. The rewrite begins, and the story to several pages is altered to fit the artwork. I also rearrange dialogue balloons, and captions, so that they fit the page and can be read in the right order.

To my surprise, the book ends up reading okay, and there is now one process left to complete – art and colour checking. Normally, this is the responsibility of the art department, but as we are a new and small company, the editorial team must also check these art issues.

This is where another problem rears its ugly head. There are several mistakes in the colouring, to list all of them would result in a list the size of a telephone book. As an example, one character's eye is blue whilst the other is green. Hair colour is another problem, throughout the book a character's hair keeps changing from blonde to dark brown.

After checking the colours for three hours, I speak with the editor-in-chief. We both agree that listing all the problems with art and colouring will take several days, fixing the art problems could take many weeks, and then there is the question of whether our requested changes will even be carried out?

Eventually, the editor-in-chief decides to send the book to the printers, despite the art and colouring problems. We both feel the project has been delayed for long enough, and that we need more titles in circulation. Having a wide variety of titles is ongoing pressure for any new publishing company.

The incident I have just relayed to you is one of many I have faced before. Its insertion into this book is not to criticise or deride any particular artists, but to show how graphic novel processes may differ depending on the company you are working for. As you can see from the above example, compromise is essential.

As you may have gathered, in certain companies, the artist has far more power than the writer or editor.

## The Long Road To Publication

If you are new to writing then you are, no doubt, positively itching to see your first book in print. Nothing would satisfy you more than to walk into a book store and see your graphic novel on the shelves.

In publishing, patience is a virtue. It may take a lot longer than you think to get your first book out, and the ensuing waiting game is enough to test the patience of a saint. Within some companies, the time from a prospecting writer handing in his synopsis to his book being available on the shelves is about two years, or more, in total.

The complete energy and time put into a few graphic novels are on a par with some Hollywood movies, and the sales odds are just as tough. Can you mention the twenty best selling graphic novels that came out in the last five years? Probably not, there will have been twenty best sellers but many of them are quickly forgotten.

Graphic novel publishing, and comic book publishing for that matter, is a tough business. If you look at the history of the industry, then you will see that there have been some major casualties. Some companies will fall and rise again, but not many will do so. In taking on your work, a publisher is taking a financial gamble. For those of you that are new writers, you must understand that your presence will cause no end of nerves for the marketing department. The fact that no one has ever heard of you before will put them in unknown territory. They prefer to have the *big name author* whose name they can put front and centre.

It may seem unfair, and even lazy, of them to think that way. Yet, their concerns are for themselves. What if this book flops? Will I still have a job? Will I be able to support my family? Self-survival is in

the mind of most publishing house staff.

Why should they waste thousands, if not millions, of dollars printing and advertising your book? That is where your self-belief is needed. You must believe in yourself because there may be only one person in the publishing house who believes in your work, and that will be the editor who decided to give you a chance.

Never make your editor into an enemy. The chances are that they will have sat in meetings where your work is torn apart by their colleagues. Your script will have been passed to an editor who never reads, and doesn't like, the kind of work you produce. I have sat in such meetings many times, and sometimes I have had to endure sitting there while my writing is savaged by a panel of editors.

Editors can be downright mean, if not evil when it comes to criticism. They will never fully express such scorn in rejection letters. If they did, I'm sure an army of lawyers would be queuing up to file lawsuits for *psychological damages*. What is said within the publishing house is often very nasty and below the belt. Your editor will sit there and explain how problems with your work can be fixed, and how your material is going to sell a great many copies. They will extol your virtues, patience, and talent. These meetings where your work is examined could take place several times. First with your synopsis as your editor gets hammered in round one, then round two begins with your page by page breakdown, and your editor will be hit in the chin more times than Rocky Balboa.

By the time they have your script, the editor will be hanging on by their fingernails with the other editors trying to stamp on their hands. There are quite a few reasons why the other editors will try to destroy all that you have worked for. The first reason may be that they genuinely hate the story, and make that known at the synopsis stage. They will allow your editor to have a shot at a page by page breakdown,

but they will be reading that too, and if they still don't like it then your story is dead in the water.

If your editor has been tough enough to get you a contract, and you have delivered a script – then that is when they will need your support the most. When you are asked to perform rewrites, it may be because other editors have asked for them, not your editor. They are hanging on to their job by a thread, and they are counting on you to make changes that might make the other editors allow the script to reach the art department.

There can be other reasons why your story is given a hard time. Your editor could be the focus of office politics, and certain editors want your editor, and your script, out of the company. As a professional, your editor will never tell you this. So, the next time they ask you for rewrites, think of a slimy political editor who is trying to stab your editorial saviour in the back. Make sure you turn in a great rewrite and you'll turn the tables on all those who would do either your editor or your material, harm.

Realise that if your editor is fired, then you and your material will be fired too. The other editors who kicked your editor out will not want to support your material. They will have told the boss that your editor was crazy to support your story. They will have explained that you are a terrible writer and nothing but an amateur hack. Once your editor is gone, do you think they will try to push your next script on to the boss? Highly doubtful, and they will have succeeded in shutting the door in your face forever.

As simply as I can put it, that is one of the major factors for work being so delayed and publishing times being put back in graphic novel production. It is a political minefield, and the worst part is that you are not inside the publishing house seeing it happen, but you will feel it when your book is delayed again, and again.



The next area where your book can be delayed is within the art department. Your editor has succeeded in getting your script down there, but the art director doesn't want to play ball. They only have so many artists and they cannot commit anyone to your work for quite some time. A great editor will go down there and fight it out to get an artist, and a good one, to start illustrating your masterpiece. Think about the effect this is having on your poor editor: sleepless nights, grey hair, and a feeling of great frustration as all they are trying to do are publish a great book.

Now for the last area that can cause delay: artwork that does not match the script. This is more likely to happen in companies where artists have more power. So, try to be patient if this arises. You may be asked to rewrite a few pages or make changes to fit the artwork, try to be professional, but if you are asked to do it then please tell them that you will need some kind of payment to compensate you. If the artist has ignored your script, then that problem should be addressed by the publisher.

Do try to be open-minded about the situation. Some artists do come up with better ways to express what you had in mind, visually, and it is always worth looking at what they have come up with. If you feel you can incorporate the changes, explain that but ensure that you are paid for it. The problem is emanating from the publisher, so they must either ask the artist to redraw the work, or offer you the chance to make some changes to the script.

If your work is changed considerably, then take steps to prevent this from happening again. Ask the publisher if they can ensure that you are contacted before the artist carries out alternative illustrations. Never threaten legal action or get angry, if the publishing house is not competent enough to produce books without such major problems, then you should seek out a more professional publisher.

**Do Not Tell Them What They Should Be Doing; Sell Them What They Are Doing**

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