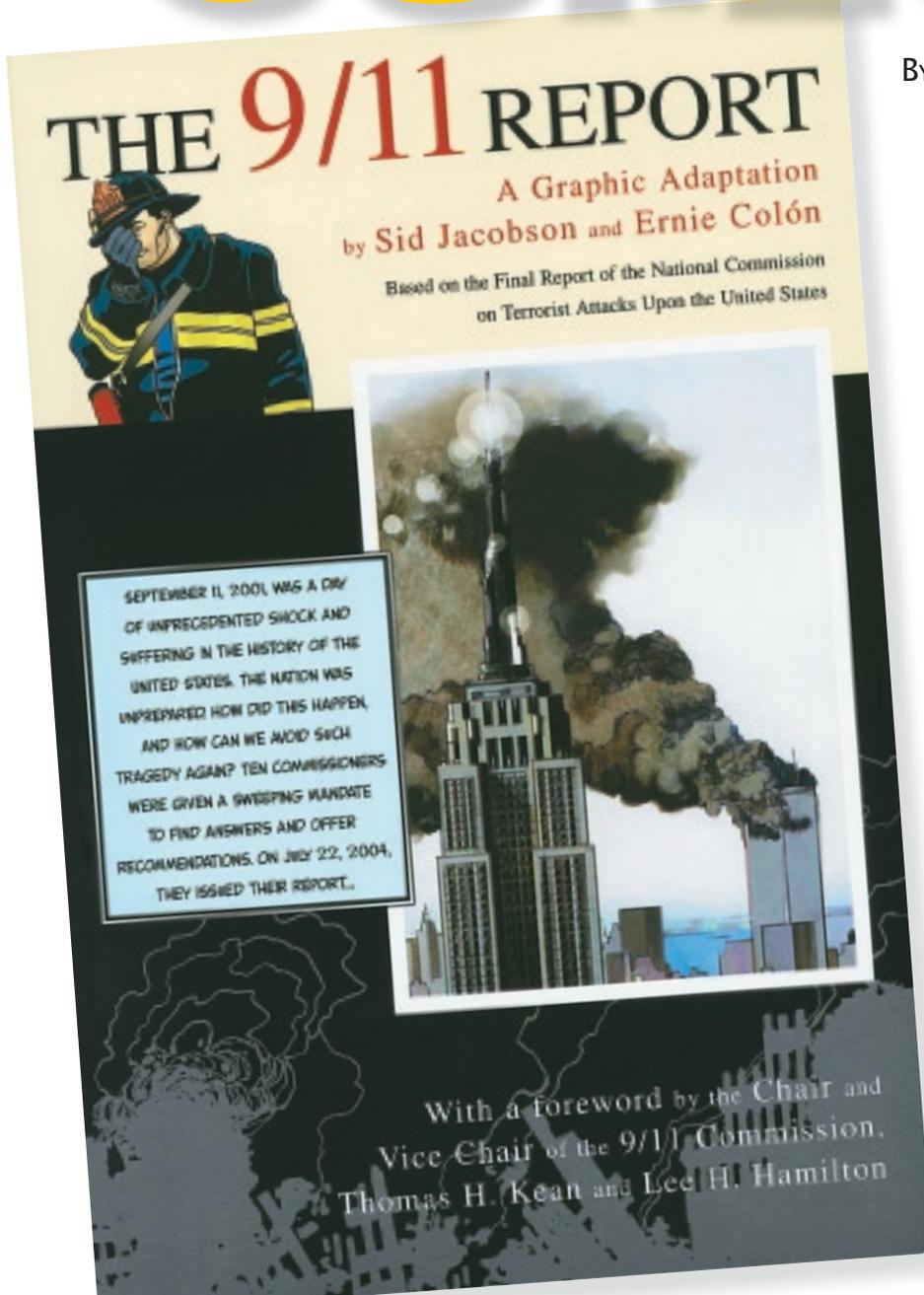


# What Technical Communicators Can Learn from

# COMICS

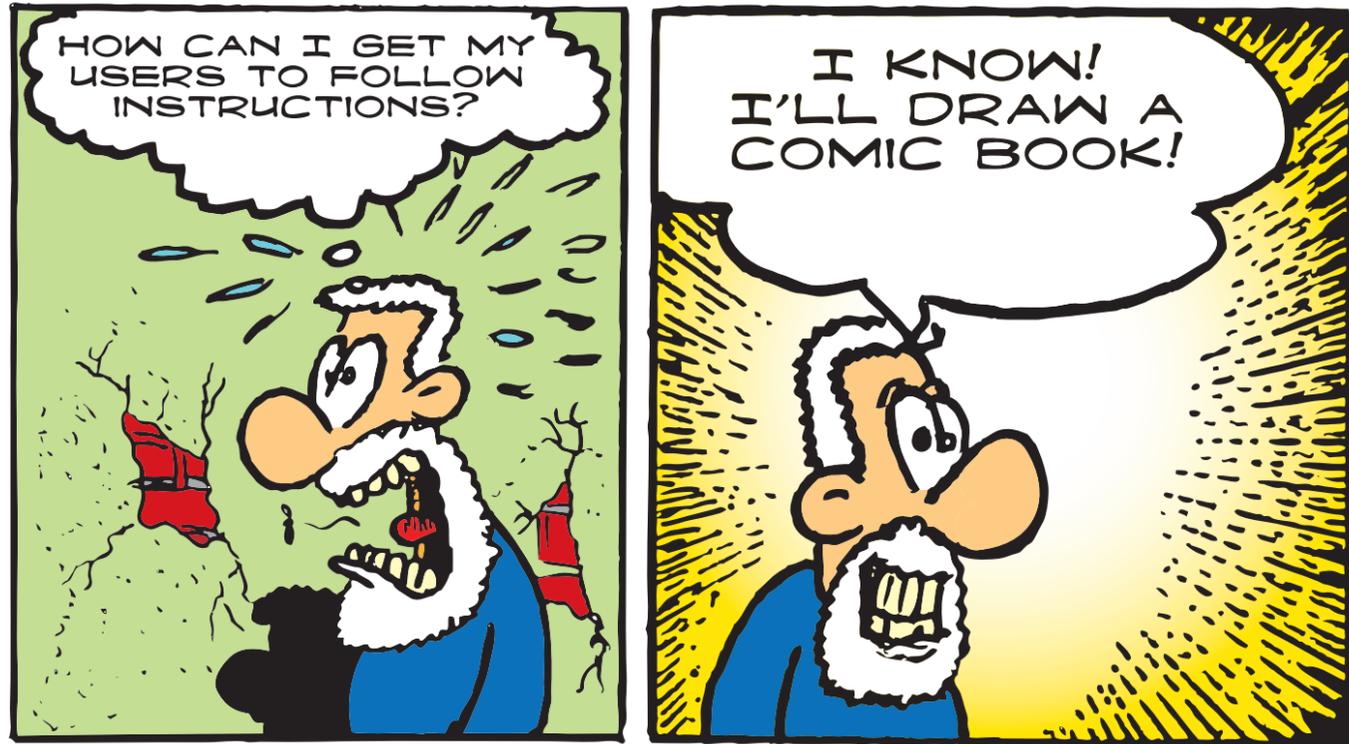


BY MICHAEL OPSTEEGH, *Senior Member*

Comic books offer excellent examples of visual communication. Technical communication professionals, from novices to veterans, can learn innovative techniques by studying comic books and looking to them for design, page layout, and communication principles.

First, let's dispel any misconception that comics are kids' stuff. There are many comic books that appeal to mature audiences and tackle a variety of social and political issues. *Dilbert* is an example of a comic that many adults read in the business section of the newspaper every morning. I'll bet some of you even have the *Dilbert* widget for your desktop.

Granted, we read *Dilbert* for entertainment, but there are several examples of comics that communicate complex technical information to readers. By complex and technical, I mean that comics transmit large amounts of detailed information or theoretical ideas. An example of a comic that tackles complex theoretical ideas (and is actually about the theories behind comics themselves) is Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, from which I draw on for this article. An example of a comic that attempts to communicate a lot of sociological, if not emotionally charged, information is Sid Jacobson and Ernie



Colón's graphic novel adaptation of the 9/11 Commission Report. This comic makes oodles of information accessible to readers of all ages and helps readers keep track of that information by making names, events, places, and times more memorable to a reader.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, technical communication could use some of that economy. Considering that Jacobson and Colón's *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* is 144 pages, while *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* weighs in at a hefty 604 pages, there is something to be said for using comics to hold our readers' attention.

Talk about economical! How does *Dilbert* manage to communicate so much to a wide audience in the span of three panels? Sure, you could dismiss *Dilbert* as not having the onerous task of instructing users through life-or-death tasks, such as operating and maintaining a service rifle in a war zone. No one would ever use a comic to train young troops on using their service rifles, would they? You bet they would! The US Army contracted comic artist Will Eisner to create a manual for the M16A rifle that could

## Amplify WARNINGS by setting them apart from the rest of your text.

quickly train a diverse group of soldiers on how to use the weapon.

Comics can and have been used to communicate large amounts of complex information to diverse audiences in an economical and meaningful manner. Sounds a lot like technical communication, right?

If we can agree that the rhetorical aims of comics and technical communication can sometimes overlap, then what are the aspects of comics that lend themselves to those rhetorical aims, and what can technical communication gain by taking pages from comics' playbook?

### Amplification Through Simplification

Despite the varied styles of art employed by comics over the years, many of us conjure up ideas of simple line drawings when we think about comics. Scott McCloud suggests that we are enthralled by the supposed simplicity of comic art because the simplicity of cartooning amplifies its message. When comic art is simple or abstract, the artist hasn't eliminated detail as much as he or she has amplified certain aspects or features by including them. Often the background images in comics are more detailed while the characters are more simple and abstract. The simplicity of the characters against a detailed background is what draws our eye to the characters.

Technical illustrators have stuck to this same principle also. Technical illustrations are generally line drawings rather than photographs. They favor certain details over others in order to emphasize the important aspects of the object of the illustration and draw the reader's attention to them.

Technical writers and editors can emphasize certain details within instructions, policies, procedures, proposals, and white papers by stating them simply.

Warnings are a fine example of text that should not be bogged down with too many details.

*Amplify warnings by setting them apart from the rest of your text.*

### Making the Invisible Visible

Comics have an uncanny way of making the invisible visible. For example, the shape of a panel, the angle of the drawing, or the ratio of ink to white space can convey such invisible information as emotion, mood, and time. Comics convey a wealth of invisible information using metaphors and symbols. For example, a comic can convey time by the number of panels used to complete an action, smell with a few way lines over an open trash can, or anxiety with the use of harsh, jagged line edges.

Technical illustrators use arrows to convey motion, which is visible in life but invisible in still images. They may use dashed lines to show the outline of a hidden part of an object. Illustrators might show a clockface with the hands in different positions to illustrate the passage of time or to give the reader a sense of the time required to complete a task.

Technical writers and editors use their own symbols to make the invisible visible. Those symbols are text, of course. Text is perhaps the most abstract way of conveying information because it bears no resemblance to the objects it describes, but we have agreed upon, more or less, a set of rules that allow us to interpret text symbols. We encode the message by writing, and we decode the message by reading. Writers use language to set the tone, mood, and time. Mood, tone, and time are important to technical communicators because they influence the readers' attitude toward the information, how seriously the reader heeds the warnings, and how successful he or she will be in completing a task or accepting a proposal.

*Pay close attention to your language; it sets the mood, tone, and time of your documents.*

### Chunking Information

By their very nature, comics break down information into manageable, bite-size chunks. Most comics abide

## Pay close attention to your LANGUAGE.

by the standard panel format in which each chunk of information is enclosed in a border and separated by a gutter. Even the avant-garde comic artists who try to do away with the enclosed panels and no-man's-land gutters still chunk information—the panels may be gone, but the artist must still show motion and the passage of time. Comics demonstrate that the structure does not matter, but the need for chunking information remains.

Technical communicators must also chunk information into discreet sections in their proposals or discernable steps in their user manuals. Technical communicators, like comic artists, must decide if a piece of information should be one step or two. Should this action take place in one panel or two? Such tools as Information Mapping are available to help technical communicators develop a methodology for chunking information, but reading more comic books may be just as effective.

*Chunk your information, simplify your procedures, and use appropriate headings as signposts for your readers.*

### Should Technical Communication Mimic Comics?

Although I see many more overlapping ideologies between comics and technical communication than I can elaborate on here, I see no reason to use the comic format as the primary means to convey information. Technical communicators are not likely to design a manual on programming a nuclear warhead in the format of a comic because it would be difficult for a comic to convey the gravity of the operation, the nuances of the redundancies built into the operation, or the precariousness of human

life. This is not to say that comics would be incapable, but they wouldn't seem appropriate. Technical documents are often designed so that the user can easily search for information and perform a particular task. Comic books, however, are designed to be read from beginning to end. In a comic-book-style manual, the user would not be able to navigate to the information he or she needed quickly. (I'm imagining a technician scanning the manual panel by panel as the time on the warhead counts down: 10... 9... 8....)

I do argue, however, that comics can teach technical communicators how to relate to diverse audiences. While comics should not become the primary method of our communication, they have a place in technical communication, and Will Eisner's training manual for the M16A rifle is a fine example of how technical communicators can learn from and use comics in addition to other methods. In fact, Google released its new web browser, Chrome, this past September. Chrome sports a comic-book-style manual, in addition to other manuals. The comic manual is drawn by Scott McCloud, the same author (and artist) of *Understanding Comics*. In searching the web for technical communication comics, Google's comic manual is generating a lot of dialogue (both positive and negative) in the blogosphere and in the technical communication world. Furthermore, as the functional literacy of Americans falls lower and lower, technical communicators will see more and more use for comic-book-style manuals. ☛

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