

# Turning a document into a comic: 4 steps

Anne Ketola

Simple comics are an efficient way of communicating content for readers who have difficulties with written text. Images make content easier to understand for readers who struggle with a particular language or with reading in general. Comics are easy to browse and digest at a glance. In addition, comics can make content more attractive for readers: If we present something as a comic, our readers are simply more likely to read it in detail. Comics therefore also benefit readers who do not have linguistic or cognitive challenges.

This article presents basic instructions for converting a text-only document into a comic. These instructions have been adapted from the [Five Steps to Plain Language](#)<sup>1</sup> that are published on the website of the Center for Plain Language. The information design process of making a plain language document and making a “plain comic” are surprisingly similar.

The process of making the comic has four stages:

**Step 1:** Identify and describe your target audience

**Step 2:** Structure the content of your document

**Step 3:** Create the illustrations by using simple visual techniques

**Step 4:** Test your design and content

These instructions focus on the visual solutions of the comic, but, needless to say, the text included in the comic needs to be accessible as well (language that is clear and concise, free of unnecessary jargon).

For a hands-on example of using these instructions, see the author’s [video](#) of making a comic out of fire safety instructions.<sup>2</sup>

## Step 1: Identify and describe the target audience

Who will be reading your document, and what do they use the document for? What do they need to do, know, and learn based on your document? List audience characteristics that might influence design (for example age, cultural and linguistic background, if relevant). For instance, if you know that children will be using the document, consider employing visual solutions that appeal for this audience.

The linguistic and cultural background of your readers may affect both the verbal and visual aspects of your comic. If (some of) your readers are not fluent in the language of the document, pay even more attention to the comprehensibility of the text.

Your readers’ linguistic background may also affect their default reading direction. People whose native language reads left to right tend to intuitively start reading a comic page at the upper left corner of the page, and people whose native language reads right to left then to start at the upper right.



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1 <https://centerforplainlanguage.org/learning-training/five-steps-plain-language/>

2 <https://cutt.ly/aRyr9A>

Colors and symbols may also carry different meanings for readers from different cultural backgrounds. For instance, the typical symbol for a hospital is a red cross in some cultures, in others, it is a crescent moon and a star.

## Step 2: Structure the content

The contents of the document need to be restructured and at least partly rewritten before the illustration can start.

- **Choose relevant content.** Does everything in the document have to be included in the comic? Are there parts in the document that can be shortened for the comic? Are there sentences that could be combined? Are there parts in the document that cannot be transformed into images—that need to be presented as text-only (e.g., references to legal materials, such as statutes, court decisions and legislative materials)?
- **Segment text into panel-sized bits.** This is the point where you can start thinking about your content in terms of images. Plan how many panels you will need for depicting your content. Some sentences can be expressed with one image (one panel). Sometimes several sentences can be combined into one image. Sometimes several images are needed to convey one single sentence (for instance, sentences that express different temporal stages, e.g., “You can work full time until *your work application is decided*”). You can also plan how much space you want to dedicate for a certain theme (e.g., a certain part of the document), and then estimate how many panels you can fit into that space.
- **Start editing your text.** The text that is included in the comic should ideally follow the principles of plain language. In addition to making the text more comprehensible, it should also be significantly shortened. Start shortening the text before the illustration starts, and be prepared to shorten it even more when the images are ready and it is time to add the text.

Re-structure your content by considering and weighing the following:

- **Chronological order:** In which order do things happen? What needs to be shown to the reader first for the comic to make sense?
- **Thematic order:** Which parts of the document describe or are related to the same events or processes? Group related information and separate the unrelated.
- **Order of importance:** What is the most essential thing the reader needs to know and remember? Emphasize essential content either by presenting it in the beginning of your comic or the top of a comic page (or by making it larger, as discussed below).

Analyze your document from all three perspectives and consider if or how they are relevant for your comic. Which solutions would make sense for your comic? For instance, is there a bit of information that is so important for the reader to grasp that it should be presented in the very beginning, even if mentioning it later would make more sense for the chronological order of things?

## Step 3: Create the illustrations by using simple visual techniques

Once you have an idea of the structure of your comic and a rough idea of what type of panels you want to include, the illustration can start. Ideally, this part of the process

involves close cooperation between content experts (people who know the subject matter of the document) and the visual artist/illustrator.

The artistic solutions of the illustrator should aim for clarity and simplicity. At the same time, the comic should look visually appealing enough to draw the reader's attention and motivate reading.

Practical illustration solutions can involve considering the following:

- **Planning a grid:** Consider your page design in terms of a grid (invisible vertical and horizontal lines that show where content will go). Adhering to your basic grid (a clear alignment of comic panels, and so on) gives your content a sense of order. It also offers your reader a clear reading path through the material. On the other hand, deviating from your basic grid (e.g., making one of the panels significantly larger, or placing a round panels between rectangular ones) can be used for emphasis.
- **Navigational clues:** Use the amount of space between panels and other visual elements to reflect the relationship between the elements, where possible or relevant. Group panels that belong together and separate panels that are not meant to be read together. Consider using lines and arrows to signal the correct reading path if your design requires it.
- **Characters:** Consider what type of characters might work for your readers. The characters can be human or non-human, simple or detailed. Generally speaking, it may be easier for your readers to identify with characters that look human. Yet sometimes non-human characters can be used to create a subtle layer of humor. An example of this is a comic employment contract made by Australian engineering and design company Aurecon, where the main character was a talking lightbulb. The company described the solution as being “playful with serious attempt”.
- **Hierarchy of information:** The most important information should look the most important. Emphasize essential content through:
  - **Layout:** Place important items at the top of the page (the center of the page sometimes works for visual focus, too).
  - **Relative size:** Make important items larger than less-important ones.
  - **Color:** Use bright(er) color to signal importance and to make important items visually “louder”. Warm, bright colors typically work well for emphasis.



- **Color:** In addition to using color to signal importance, color can be used to connect related items throughout the comic (show your reader that some items are thematically connected). On a similar note: It is important to use colors consistently, so that readers do not interpret thematic similarities and differences where they are not intended.

Use symbolic colors where relevant (green and red for right and wrong, etc.). However, try not to build a message on color alone, since it might be inaccessible, for instance, for a color-blind reader.

- **Contrast:** Remember to use sufficient contrast in your content, especially colors. Make sure essential content stands out. A quiet, solid background usually works best.

#### Step 4: Test the design and content

The final, most important step in making the comic is to test it with readers. If content experts have not been included in the design process, consult their opinions on the illustrations. Do things look like they are supposed to look like? Is essential content emphasized enough?

Target user groups offer the most valuable feedback on whether the comic is comprehensible. The Five Steps to Plain Language instructions offer excellent test questions for this purpose. You can, for instance, ask your readers to describe key concepts or processes in their own words, taking notes on the parts where they stumble or that they appear to have misunderstood, and then rethink your solutions in those parts.

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