

Comic Lettering Guide

Comic book lettering has some grammatical and aesthetic traditions that are unique. What follows is a list that every letterer eventually commits to memory. The majority of these points are established tradition, sprinkled with modern trends. The majority of these ideas have been established by Marvel and DC, but opinions vary from editor to editor, even within the same company. Letterers are often asked to bend or break these rules based on what "feels" best, or more likely, the space constraints within a panel.

As a letterer you're eventually going to see scripts from writers who don't know these standards or aren't interested in them. (Although the best writers *are* well versed in these points.) It'll be up to you to spot and fix these in the event that the editor misses them.

Note: Underlined terms reference another entry in the article.

Directions: During the class presentation and discussion on comic lettering, fill in the blanks. Keep this handout as a guide for your own comic work.



ASTERISK

An asterisk appearing in dialogue _____ an editor's note; a _____ somewhere else in the panel or on the page. These generally _____ the reader that more information can be found in a separate issue or comic book, or explain an _____.



BALLOON TAILS

If at all possible, a balloon tail should point to a _____ as if an _____ line continued on past the end of the tail to their face. Pointing it in the general area of the character, (their hand, leg, etc.,) should be avoided if possible. A tail should terminate at roughly _____ % of the distance between the balloon and the character's head.



BOLD

There's almost no _____ bold in comics dialogue. Typically, bold/italic is used when _____ is placed on a word. Occasionally you may use a non-traditional dialogue font that will actually work better with plain bold. I've found this most often comes up with indie/underground books with their own very specific look and feel.



BREAKING BORDERS

Similar to butting borders, this stylistic choice consists of the white interior of a balloon breaking into the white of the _____. This is determined completely by _____ but seems to be more prevalent in hand lettering. I suspect this is because doing it digitally generally adds an extra few steps that can take time to do properly and cleanly. But remember: If the gutters in a book aren't white, you may run into the problem of not being consistent throughout.



BREATH MARKS

Also called "cat's whiskers", "fireflies" or "crow's feet", breath marks are usually _____ little dashes stacked _____ that come before and after some sort of cough or sputter. The word with the breath marks around it may be italicized, lowercase or bold. There seems to be no hard and fast rule for these. I generally italicize and if the coughing gets really bad, I use _____. If you use an opening and closing set with no word in between, you get a symbol that looks like a tiny bursting bubble that indicates _____ or _____ of a character. This is often used to end the text in a wavy balloon.



BURST BALLOONS

Burst Balloons are used when someone is _____ their dialogue. They tend to be more _____ and _____ than the radio balloon, perhaps with a _____ stroke. Burst balloon dialogue is often bold with certain words enlarged or underlined for even more emphasis. A less punchy variation on the burst balloon is a regular balloon with a small burst where the tail meets the balloon.



BUTTING BORDERS

This is also called "_____", "Top-lining" or "Side-lining". This is the best weapon in your arsenal to combat _____. Essentially, some part of a balloon is cropped _____ and placed _____ the border. Useful when a writer has given you the Gettysburg Address and the artist has given you a thimble to fit it in. Left aligning, centering or right aligning the text against a border is a great _____ of pace in any book.



CAPTIONS

There are five types of captions in comics: Location & Time, Internal Monologue, Spoken, and Editorial. Location & Time captions can be in the _____ as your dialogue only inside a caption box and italicized. In many cases these are italicized and can be lowercase as well as having drop caps or outlines. Internal Monologue captions, largely replacing thought balloons, are the inner voice of a character. These are typically italicized. Spoken Captions are the _____ speech of a character that is _____.

These are not italicized but make special use of quotation marks. Finally, Editorial captions feature the voice of the _____ or _____ and are also italicized.



CROSSBAR I

This is probably the biggest _____ seen amongst amateur letterers. An "I" with the crossbars on top and bottom is virtually only used for the _____, "I." The only other allowable use of the "crossbar I" is in _____ (like, F.B.I). Any other instance of the letter should just be the vertical stroke version. Although I would debate it, you occasionally see the "crossbar I" used as the first letter of someone's name.



DOUBLE DASH

There is no Em or En dash in comics. It's always a double dash and it's only used when a character's speech is _____. The double dash and the _____ are not interchangeable, even though many writers use them interchangeably. For the record, there are only TWO dashes in a double dash. It sounds like common sense, but you'd be surprised.



DOUBLE OUTLINE BALLOONS

Double outline balloons serve the same purpose as a burst balloon - to add _____ to dialogue. The tail of a double outline balloon can connect to either the inner or outer balloon and the background balloon usually sports a _____ fill or a heavier stroke. Variations are numerous and up to the letterer.



DROP CAPS

Drop caps are an _____ or _____ first letter in a caption. They come in a wide variety of styles and sizes, and are most often a stylistic choice by the letterer. Sometimes they _____ every inner monologue caption, or just the location/time captions.



ELLIPSES

The ellipsis is used when a character's speech trails off. If a character is speaking, _____, and then resumes in another balloon, you should always end the first dialogue with an ellipsis and then begin the second dialogue with an ellipsis. Another allowable use is when a character's _____ is _____ or they pause due to _____. Injured characters or those soon-to-be unconscious often make good use of this in wavy balloons. There are only **THREE** periods in an ellipsis. Again, you'd be surprised how often you see four or more.



EMANATING DIALOGUE

When a character is speaking _____, from behind a door or from _____ a _____, for instance, the tail of their balloon terminates at the point of origin and has a small, multi-pointed burst at the end of it. Letterers often take creative license with the burst, sometimes giving it curves, making an irregular star shape, or even using something that resembles a pair of breath marks.



FOREIGN LANGUAGES

When a character speaks in a foreign language, each block of dialogue is begun with a " _____ " symbol and ended with a " _____ " symbol. Often, the first appearance of the language will also end with an _____ to denote an Editorial Caption that explains what language this is being _____ from.



HOLLOW SOUND EFFECTS

A relatively recent trend in sound effects - hollow sound effects have an outline, but the center is see-through, so that _____ can still be seen. This is most often reserved for instances when _____, or need for impact demand it.



HYPHENATING

There's no set rule on hyphenating a long word to make it _____ a balloon, but it's generally accepted that you should _____ it if at all possible, and even then, only if it's a _____ word that breaks well.



ITALICS

The use of italics is quite varied: Italic dialogue is used for internal monologues, traditional-style _____ & _____ captions, editorial captions, in thought balloons, for words that are in a language other than English, or for any instance where a voice is being _____ through a TV, radio, communicator, as in a radio balloon. Occasionally, you'll see italics used for non-verbal words like "Uh," or "Huh", or in conjunction with someone who is whispering. Italics are also used for non-English words and the titles of movies, books, etc.



JOINING BALLOON TO BALLOON

Balloons directly joined together are generally of the same _____ . Two or more expressions that are of the same topic should be executed this way. This rule is most often broken when _____ don't permit it and you have to use a connector.



JOINING BALLOONS W/ CONNECTORS

There are two instances where this is used. The first is when a character says _____ ideas expressed one after the other. The second instance is when two characters are speaking in a panel and the _____ goes back and forth between them. Their balloons will be staggered and joined with connectors. This rule is most often broken when space constraints don't permit it and you have to join the balloons directly.



LOWERCASE

Barring the trend in Marvel comics to use sentence-case fonts on some books, lowercase generally reserved for non-verbal vocalizations like "Uh", "Heh", "Umm", etc. A rule of thumb is that any vocalization that isn't a real word, and is actually more like a noise, should be lowercase. Italicizing in this instance is optional but unnecessary. Occasionally you may see lowercase used as a visual cue indicating someone is _____.



MUSIC NOTES

A lone music note generally denotes _____. You often see one or two music notes in a dialogue balloon, which indicates _____. Sung dialogue is often _____ and follows a _____ baseline.



NUMBERS

Numbers in dialogue should be spelled out unless they're a _____, designation, part of a _____ or a large number. A good rule of thumb is that any number over _____ can be numeric.



OFF-PANEL DIALOGUE

When a character speaks from " _____", the tail of the balloon generally butts against the panel border. Some editors prefer to simply have a tailless balloon. These balloon tails can be a _____ shape, or an _____ -shape.



OVERLAPPING BORDERS

Overlapping a balloon over a border tends to look a little amateurish, but can be necessary due to _____. If at all possible, you're better off _____ balloons to a border. If you really have to overlap a border, continue to do it throughout the book as a stylistic choice or it'll really stand out.



QUESTION MARK/EXCLAMATION POINT COMBO

This should only be used for a _____ question. It's a loose rule that the _____ should come first. Marvel insists on it, and I agree, since the text is probably already bold or enlarged (indicating shouting) so the only visual clue a reader has that it's also a question, is the question mark -- giving it priority.



QUOTATION MARKS

Quotation marks are used for spoken captions when a character is speaking _____. In the event that there is more than one caption in the series, you should begin each caption with an open quote, but **ONLY** use the end quote on the final caption in the series. If two or more characters have spoken captions, end quotes should appear as each speaker finishes/before the next one begins. Punctuation on the last line of a quote should always appear _____ the closing quotation mark. Some editors ask that an end quote be used at the end of a page even if the captions resume on the following page.



RADIO BALLOONS

These are also called, "electric balloons". Whenever speech is _____ through a radio, TV, telephone, or any type of speaker, it is italicized and in a radio balloon. The most common version is a uniformly _____ balloon with a _____ tail to the source. Over the decades, letterers have introduced other types of balloons have started to become commonplace (see examples) - probably to differentiate between a radio balloon and a burst balloon.



ROUGH BALLOONS

Most often used for the dialogue of _____, and in conjunction with _____ for a _____ or _____ voice.



SMALL DIALOGUE/BIG BALLOON

A reduced font size is used when a character _____ something, says something to him/herself, or speaks _____. Often you'll see a lot of space left in the balloon. This is sometimes used for _____.



SOUND EFFECTS PUNCTUATION

In general, sound effects lack _____ with the exception of when you intend to seem cartoony or over the top. SFX punctuation may seem _____ these days because designers in mainstream media often try to invoke a "comic book feel" with graphics campaigns using affected sound effects. The best example I can think of is recently Gap Kids created a campaign of in-store banners that featured comic book sound effects reminiscent of the 60's Batman TV show - these types of uses are designed to instantly read "comic book" to consumers who really have no idea how actual comic lettering looks.



SPACES

You no longer need two spaces after the end punctuation of a sentence. _____ space is sufficient. There should also be _____ space before or after an ellipsis or double dash



TELEPATHIC BALLOONS

When a character is speaking telepathically the dialogue may be italicized. Old-school telepathy balloons look like a thought balloon except they have breath marks on _____ corners. These days, many letterers opt to _____ the traditional style and get creative with these



THOUGHT BALLOONS

Thought balloons have fallen out of fashion in recent years in preference for _____ captions. Text in a thought balloon can be italicized. The tail on a thought balloon is made up of smaller bubbles and should point towards a character's _____ (not mouth, as in standard balloon tails). Generally you should have at least _____ little bubbles of _____ size that reach toward the character.

