Lettering

"A balloon is supposed to be an integral part of the action" (Eisner 35).

Look through a comic or trade – what do you notice about the lettering? Write down page numbers and notes on observations. When are specific techniques used? What do stylistic choices mean?

Defining Letterer

- Sometimes has to make up lost time for a writer or artist who fell behind deadlines

- Makes the dialogue flow correctly across the page, allowing the reader's eye to naturally skip from one balloon to the next in the correct order

Letterer's Job
(Step by Step)

- Uses visual cues to create diverse, imaginary voices and sounds in the reader's head through choice of font, font size, and styles

- Letters the copy
  - finds open space
  - draws the balloons and boxes
  - writes the words
  - changes font styles
  - Outlines the panels in India ink

Technology's Impact on Lettering

- Past: lettered by hand with quill pens
- Now: computers, Adobe Illustrator
  - Use Adobe Illustrator to open script Word doc
  - Change font and size of text
  - Font at 6 points (for printing)
  - Leading 6.5 points (amount of vertical spacing between two lines of type)
  - Cut and paste balloon dialogue for each page
  - Broken into smaller lines that fit in balloons
  - Slight bow in middle of block of text
  - After inserting all type breaks, center type

Asterisk

- References an editor's note

- Caption somewhere else in the panel or on the page explains the reference

- They generally inform the reader that more information can be found in a separate issue or comic book, or explain an acronym

Balloon Tails

- Should point to a character's mouth

- An invisible line continues past the end of the tail to the character's face

- Avoid pointing the tail in the general area of the character

- Tail should terminate roughly 50-60% of the distance between the balloon and the character's head

Bold

- Almost no plain bold in comic dialogue

- Used when emphasis is placed on a word

- Non-traditional dialogue font may actually work better with plain bold

- *Use sparingly*

Breaking Borders

- White interior of a balloon breaks into the white of the panel gutters

- Determined by preference

- More prevalent in hand lettering

- If gutters aren't white, you may run into the problem of not being consistent throughout

Breath Marks

- Usually 3 little dashes, stacked vertically that come before ad after some sort of cough or sputter

- Word with breath marks around it may be italicized, lowercase, or bold

- Bold indicates worsening cough

- Breath marks without word – tiny bursting bubble – indicates death or unconsciousness

Burst Balloons

- Used when someone is screaming their dialogue

- More irregular and chaotic

- Perhaps a heavier stroke

- Can have bolded, enlarged, or underlined words in balloon

- Variation of burst balloon is a regular balloon with a small burst at the tail

Butting Borders

- Aka anchoring

- Part of balloon is cropped flat and placed against the border

- Helps combat space restraints

- Left, center, or right aligning the text against the border acts as a visual change of pace

Captions

- 5 types: 1) location 2) time 3) internal monologue 4) spoken and 5) editorial
- Location & time can be in the same font as dialogue only inside caption box and italicized
- Internal monologue replace thought balloons, typically italicized
- Spoken represent vocalized speech of character that is off camera, in quotation marks
- Editorial features voice of writer or editor, italicized

Crossbar I

- Biggest mistake among amateur letterers
- "I" with the crossbars on top and bottom is only used for the personal pronoun "I"
- Also use crossbar "I" in acronyms, like F.B.I.
- Any other instance, the letter should just be a vertical stroke version

Double Dash

- No Em or En dash – long dash – in comics

- Only used when a character's speech is interrupted

- Double dash and ellipsis are not interchangeable

- Only 2 dashes

Double Outline Balloons

- Adds emphasis to dialogue

- *Can represent different personalities or characters*

- Background balloon has a color fill or heavier stroke

- Variations are up to the letterer

Drop Caps

- An enlarged or embellished first letter in a caption

- Styles and sizes are a stylistic choice by the letterer

- Can begin each inner monologue caption or just the location/time captions

Ellipses

- 3 periods

- Represents a character's speech trailing off and resuming in another balloon

- Use ellipses at end of balloon and start of the next balloon

- Can also signify stilted speech or a pause due to physical stress

Emanating Dialogue

- When a character is speaking off camera, behind a door, or inside a building

- Tail of balloon terminates at the point of origin and has a small multi-pointed burst at the end of it

Foreign Languages

- Placed in a "less than" symbol and a "greater than" symbol

- First appearance of the language should end with an asterisk to denote an editorial caption that explains what language is being translated

Hollow Sound Effects

- Recent trend in sound effects

- Outlined letters with see-through center

- Allows reader to still see focal art

- Used when you have space constraints

Hyphenating

- No set rule for hyphenating long words to make them fit in a balloon

- Avoid hyphenating words

- Only use a hyphen if it's a compound word that breaks well

Italics

- Shows internal monologues

- Used for traditional-style location and time captions or editorial captions

- Represents words translated from another language

- Signifies a voice transmitted through a TV, radio, etc.

Joining Balloon to Balloon

- Joined balloons show same thought process

- Expressions on the same topic

- Rule is often broken due to space restraints

Joining Balloons with Connectors

- Used when a character says 2 separate ideas expressed one after the other
- Or can represent a conversation going back and forth between 2 characters
  - Stagger balloons and join with connectors
  - Break rule if there are space restraints

Lowercase

- Reserved for non-verbal vocalizations like "uh", heh", "umm", etc.

- Any vocalization that isn't a real word, more like a noise

- Occasionally used to represent whispering

Music Notes

- Lone music note means whistling

- Multiple singing notes in a single dialogue balloon indicates singing

- Sung dialogue is often italicized and follows a wavy baseline

Numbers

- Spell out numbers in dialogue, unless it's:
  - A date
  - Designation
  - Part of a name
  - A numeric over twenty

Off-Panel Dialogue

- When a character speaks from "off-camera", the tail of the balloon butts against the panel border

- Some editors prefer tailless balloons

- Balloon tails can be a plain arc shape or an S-shape

Overlapping Borders

- May look amateurish, but might be necessary due to space constraints

- Use as a stylistic choice throughout the book

- Better off butting the balloon against the border

Question Mark/Exclamation Point Combo

- Represents a shouted question

- Question mark should come first

Quotation Marks

- Used when a character is speaking off-camera

- Punctuation on the last line of the quotation goes inside the quotation marks

Radio Balloons

- Shows that speech is transmitted through a radio, TV, telephone, or any type of speaker

- Text is italicized

- Balloon is uniformly spiky with a lightening bolt tail to the source

Rough Balloons

- Most often used for dialogue of monsters

- Used in conjunction with monstrous fonts

- Signifies a creepy or distorted voice

Small Dialogue/Big Balloon

- Reduced font size represents a character muttering, saying something to himself or herself, or speaking sheepishly

- A lot of empty space indicates whispering

Sound Effects Punctuation

- Sound effects often lack punctuation

- Seems trite now

Spaces

- 1 space after the end punctuation of a sentence

- No space before or after an ellipsis or double dash

Telepathic Balloons

- May italicize dialogue

- Traditional style: thought balloon with breath marks on opposing corners

- Modern letterers often abandon traditional style

Thought Balloons

- Fallen out of fashion – internal monologue captions are preferred

- Tail is made up of smaller bubbles, at least 3 bubbles of decreasing size that reach toward the character

- Tail points to character's head, not mouth

Wavy Balloons

- Aka "weak balloons"

- Used to show a character in physical distress

- Dialogue is stilted and broken by ellipses

- Balloon and tail are shaky

- As a character descends into death or unconsciousness, the dialogue gets smaller and smaller

Whispering

- Traditionally indicated by a dashed stroke balloon

- More recent options include balloon and dialogue in a muted tone (grayed-out) or with a lowercase font in conjunction with small dialogue/big balloon

Lettering Tips

- (Artist) leave room at the top of panels for lettering

- (Artist) put the person speaking first on the left and the person who speaks last on the right

- (Writers) less is more, be aware of how many balloons and words you put on a page

- (Writers) do a dialogue polish while looking at art, before sending the script to the letterer

More Lettering Tips

- (Everyone) a round of corrections after the first ballooned page is normal

- (Letterer) don't vary the size of fonts unless you're going for a specific effect

- (Letterer) readability is more important than design

- (Letterer) avoid putting balloons in places where they block the eye line between characters

Practice Lettering

1. Select 3 different moods or tones

2. Switch your paper with a partner (who is acting as the writer).

3. Using the writer's script ideas, draw balloons and font that matches the mood or tone described.

4. Be prepared to share your lettering and explain your stylistic choices. And, reference your lettering notes guide to help you.