Words for Pictures: The Art and Business of Writing Comics and Graphic Novels

By Brian Michael Bendis

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Best-selling Marvel Comics writer Brian Michael Bendis reveals the comic book writing secrets behind his work on *The Avengers, Ultimate Spider-Man, All-New X-Men,* and more.

One of the most popular writers in modern comics, Brian Michael Bendis reveals the tools and techniques he and other top creators use to create some of the most popular comic book and graphic novel stories of all time. *Words for Pictures* shows readers the creative methods of a writer at the very top of his field. Bendis guides aspiring creators through each step of the comics-making process—from idea to script to finished sequential art—for fan favorite comics like *The Avengers*, *Ultimate Spider-Man*, *Uncanny X-Men*, and more. Along the way, tips and insights from other working writers, artists, and editors provide a rare, extensive look behind the creative curtain of the comics industry. With script samples, a glossary of must-know business terms for writers, and interactive comics-writing exercises, *Words for Pictures* provides the complete toolbox needed to jump start the next comics-writing success story.

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Words for Pictures: The Art and Business of Writing Comics and Graphic Novels By Brian Michael Bendis Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #151901 in Books
- Published on: 2014-07-22
- Released on: 2014-07-22
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 10.52" h x .60" w x 8.25" l, 2.00 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 224 pages

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Editorial Review

Review
"Brian Michael Bendis illuminates the craft, and commerce, of becoming a comics pro...*Words for Pictures* covers everything from making a pitch to script writing; the book even goes over the delicate process of creative collaboration."
—David Betancourt, *The Washington Post*

"Bendis puts his classroom lessons down into a single textbook for aspiring and professional writers to help guide and encourage them in their endeavors to completing their journey towards completing their 10,000 hours and beyond."
—Forrest Helvie, *Newsarama*

"Highly recommended, *Words For Pictures* will inspire readers to craft their own ideas and become better storytellers."
—Jorge Solis, *MSTARS*

"It's an enjoyable read and…for those looking to break into comics as a writer, it's a strong compilation of advice and specific tips to help you survive an industry that's wildly different on the inside than it might seem from a fan's point of view on the outside."
—Augie De Blieck Jr, *Comic Book Resources*

"A very handsome how-to guide, presenting the information in a visually engaging way and spicing up the text with artwork from some of the industry's top talents.''
—Oliver Sava, *The Onion A.V. Club*

"A fantastic text...comes from the heart of an educator, but more importantly, the mind of a writer."
—Anthony Schultz, *Examiner*

"Acclaimed bestselling comics writer Bendis (*Ultimate Spider-Man*, *Alias*) has been the main architect of Marvel's universe for a decade, and he gives a step-by-step break down to the art of writing comics, with script styles, art tips, and interviews with his fellow scripters such as Ed Brubaker and roundtables with artists and editors. Only a few guides to comics writing have been produced and this will quickly leap to the top of the list."
—*Publisher's Weekly*

"With script samples, a glossary of must-know business terms for writers, and interactive comics-writing exercises, *Words for Pictures* provides the complete toolbox needed to jump start the next comics-writing success story."
—Gift Pick: *Forces of Geek*

"There is no one better qualified in the field of graphic novels to write this wonderful book."
—Warren Ellis, author of *Gun Machine*, *RED*, *Transmetropolitan*

"There are writers, there are great writers and then there are those very few great writers who redefine the medium like Brian Bendis has with his mastery of dialogue, character, and graphic storytelling. I'm always

asked, 'What book should I read to learn how to write and produce comics?' Now I finally have something to recommend, written by the one of the modern legends himself."

—Geoff Johns, CCO of DC Entertainment and Eisner Award-winning writer of *Green Lantern* and *Justice League*

"Bendis is a pro's pro, and he probes the creative process of writing visually with the power of an atomic microscope! Any five pages alone are worth the price of the book. Everyone harboring the dream of assaulting the comics universe *must* begin with *Words for Pictures*."

—STERANKO

"As one of the definitive comic writers of the last 20 years, Brian Michael Bendis has done more to inspire the medium than almost anyone I can think of. His writing has pushed the field forward not just once or twice, but multiple times, and he remains one of the most vibrant and inspiring writers working right now. There's simply no one better to write a book like this than Bendis. This is exactly the book I'd wished existed when I was a young writer trying to break into the industry, full of insight and terrific advice. The wisdom on writing that fills these pages will prove priceless for new writers and pros alike."

—Scott Snyder, Eisner Award-winning writer of *Batman*, *The Wake,* and *American Vampire*

"This book isn't just dedicated to the craft of writing—it's a master class in it. Packed with thoughtful advice, hard-learned lessons, and obsessive minutiae that I would've killed for, *Words for Pictures* is the remarkable result of a life dedicated to an art."

—Brad Meltzer, best-selling author of *The Inner Circle* and *Identity Crisis*

About the Author

BRIAN MICHAEL BENDIS is an award winning comics creator and one of the most successful writers working in mainstream comics. For the last twelve years, Bendis's books have dominated the top of nationwide comic and graphic novel sales charts. As a leading writer for Marvel Comics, he works on their best-selling properties like The Avengers, Spider-Man, the X-Men, and Guardians of the Galaxy. In addition, his original projects include *Scarlet, Brilliant, Powers* (currently in development as a TV series at FX), *Torso* (being developed as a film by Circle of Confusion), and the Hollywood tell-all *Fortune and Glory*. The winner of five prestigious Eisner Awards, Bendis lives with his family in Portland, where he writes and teaches comics and graphic novel writing at Portland State University and the University of Oregon.

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At the age of six, I stood in front of my family and declared myself the writer and artist of Spider-Man. I had no idea what it meant. I had no idea what I was saying. But it was declared.

Say what you will about me, but I stick to my guns.

From the moment I discovered their existence, I wanted to be one of the names in the credit boxes of my comic books. Every time I read something that I truly loved, I skipped back to the first page and memorized the names of the people responsible for the awesomeness. I knew I wanted to be a comic book professional, but I had no idea how to get from my bedroom in Cleveland to the little credit boxes in my comics.

As soon as allowance became part of my life, I spent every cent of it on pursuing this dream. Yes, that meant collecting comics, but it also meant searching for answers. How do you make comic books? And how do you make them awesome?

I bought every publication that featured an interview with a creator. Pre-Internet, finding a lengthy interview of real substance on George Pérez or Frank Miller was a rare treat. *Comics Scene*, *Comic Buyer's Guide*, and

Amazing Heroes magazines were my grade school.

My copy of *How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way* by Stan Lee and John Buscema, which I still own, looks like it survived a couple of world wars. Every page has been picked over and analyzed, drawn on and annotated.

As I got older, the quest became more passionate and more diverse. Every convention offered the opportunity to meet creators and ask them questions—even if it was a creator whose work I didn't know.

My fondest early convention memory is, at age twelve, attending a comic book show in downtown Cleveland where comic legend Gil Kane was conducting a "How to Draw Comics" seminar. My father signed me up, even though he had no idea who Gil Kane was, and, at my young age, I didn't know either. I knew he was the writer/artist of *Sword of the Atom* and I knew he had something to do with *Green Lantern*, but I didn't know until later that he was a bona fide comics legend. Atom and Green Lantern? He CREATED the modern versions of those characters. He was partly responsible for some of the most important Spider-Man stories of all time. He published some of the very first modern graphic novels, and he is in the Will Eisner Award Hall of Fame. It would take a couple of years for me to be completely floored by the fact that I was taught anatomy by Gil Kane. It's like being taught how to work a film camera by Sidney Lumet. I remember the class as if it were the day before yesterday. I was so hungry for any knowledge. I was raw. I didn't even know what a gesture drawing was. I learned that from Gil Kane.

The first issue of Frank Miller's *Ronin* was all the rage, a real sensation, and someone in the class asked Gil Kane what he thought of it. Steam literally started to fly out of Kane's ears. He went to his easel and started to furiously draw a horse, all the while growling at us that "*THAT'S* what a horse *REALLY* looks like." At that age, Frank Miller was God to me. And I, up until that moment, had never seen a grown man be furiously jealous of another man's success.

These were all firsts for me. I was dizzy. I was like Lorraine Bracco in the beginning of *Goodfellas*: I couldn't *WAIT* to become a comic book professional.

That next year there was a smaller comic book show not far from my house, where a very young John Totleben was a guest. John had just started his soon-to-be legendary run on *Swamp Thing* with Alan Moore, and was just there making sketches and selling pages of artwork. There was no one at the show, so I got a lot of face time with John. I looked through his artwork, and was truly stunned at how horrifying it was. I was a baby of artists like John Byrne, Walt Simonson, and George Pérez, so John's work, at that time, was something way beyond my comprehension. But it was probably the first original artwork I had ever seen in person. It was the first time I had touched someone else's ink on paper. In just a few years, those pages would become some of my favorite comics ever, but the first impression was too much for me.

I asked John every dumb question a young person asks a comic book artist, and he couldn't have been more gracious in answering me. He showed me the difference between the printed work and the original artwork, and I was quite amazed at how much of a difference there was.

If you've never seen John's work in person, I don't think it's hard to imagine that with all its pixilation and pointillism and heavy ink work that the tactile sensation of touching the artwork is closer to touching a painting than it is to touching a standard page of comic book art. It is the type of artwork that you can touch and actually feel all of the hard work that went into it. It isn't something that is just drawn, it is labored over.

What was clear at the time was that there were textures on the page that were so fine that when they printed on the newsprint, standard for all comics at the time, they just turned to mud. It would be years until the industry standard for printing would allow anyone to see all that hard work.

I asked him why he went to all the trouble if no one was even going to see it. He shrugged and said, "It makes me happy." THAT was Life-Changing Lesson-of-the-Day Number One.

My father said something about how surprisingly quiet the show was. John said that there was a much larger convention across the street, and that Walt Simonson was the guest.

My jaw hit the floor. "Walt Simonson??!! *Thor's* Walt Simonson??!! *X-Men versus Teen Titans's* Walt Simonson??!! Is here??! In Cleveland??!!"

I grabbed my artwork and yelled, "Walt Simonson??!! Let's get out of here!" And ran out of the room.

Over the course of my career, especially during my early days as an independent comic book artist, I have spent many hours behind the tables in "artist alleys" where someone has said or done something that was accidentally hurtful. When it happens, I always smile to myself because I know that's exactly what I did to young John Totleben that day. I have gotten to a place in my life where I have been able to not only apologize profusely to John, but also actually work with him. For the record, he didn't remember it. I would have.

But that wasn't Life-Changing Lesson-of-the-Day Number Two . . .

Life-Changing Lesson-of-the-Day Number Two came when I ran across the street and right up to Walt Simonson at the other show. I ran up to his table, out of breath, I'm sure pushing past the people who were waiting for their turn, and bluntly asked Walt for the answers to all of life's riddles. With my arms full of my very rudimentary artwork, I begged him to show me the light.

Instead of calling security, he graciously took me behind his table and went through all of my artwork and actually had a serious answer for the dumbest question I had ever asked another human being: How do you know what to draw first—the perspective or the anatomy?

Think about that question for a minute. It's really a dumb, dumb, very dumb question.

Whatever else Walt Simonson said to me that day, he made me feel like a million bucks. I left there ready to become a comic book professional. Nothing was going to stop me. I was completely empowered.

Over the course of the next few years, every time I thought I had something worth showing I would mail it to Walt Simonson. I would mail it to a lot of people, but Walt Simonson would respond—always with encouraging words, always with some sort of guidance.

So as I spent the next several years working on my craft (which included drawing my version of Marvel Comics' adaptation of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* because I thought they had screwed it up; writing and drawing a "Captain America versus Punisher" graphic novel over and over, six times in total, using the novelization of the *Avengers: Ultron* story as a script for what I thought was going to be the greatest Avengers graphic novel ever created; and my brother and I getting the school art teacher to let us use the mimeograph to run off copies of our first original graphic novel *The Powerful Pachyderm*, only to get in trouble once the school discovered we were selling it for profit. I said to myself that if I ever got to be a comic book professional, I would do whatever I could to share whatever I ended up learning with anyone who asked.

When I became a comic book professional, I thought to myself, *"Whatever you do, wherever you go . . . be Walt Simonson."*

In that same day, I had two life-changing lessons: do what makes you happy, and be Walt Simonson.

At the same time, my frustration was insane. Information was so hard to come by. I felt like an archaeologist. It would be years until Scott McCloud put together *Understanding Comics*, and Will Eisner's *Comics and*

Sequential Art was not easy to find. Even when I got those books, I needed more. I was taking life-drawing classes after school at the community college, but no one there was teaching a course on comic books. All I had were my memories of a feisty Gil Kane and old issues of *Comics Scene*.

Without realizing it or declaring it to anybody, I had set forth on my life's journey for information. Day after day, month after month, year after year, whether from some little bit in the Bullpen Bulletins page of any Marvel comic or in a Fantaco retrospective of George Pérez's career, I was learning.

I eventually made it into the Cleveland Institute of Art (don't ask me how), a very well-respected fine arts school that did not care what walls Dave McKean or Bill Sienkiewicz were breaking down in the world of mainstream comic books. I even stormed into class there one day with the latest copy of *Print* magazine whose entire issue was dedicated to comics. It showcased the fact that the most important work going on in illustration and graphic design that year was actually happening in comics.

They didn't care.

I was so frustrated. I wanted to take college-level classes about graphic novels. I wanted to take theoretical, historical and practical workshop classes on every facet of the business, art form, and industry.

Nobody cared.

But they were kind enough, or I was annoying enough, to finally allow me to go into an independent study program where I could make my comics and learn my craft. By myself.
It's a good thing, too, because the only way I ever really learned my craft was by making comics.

And make comics I did.

Lots and lots of comics.

As the years went by, I became a fixture in the independent comic book scene of the 1990s. With every comic came another collaboration and another meeting of the minds with my peers and my heroes.

Every day I learned and studied. Every mistake I made was a chance to do it right the next time. Every mistake I watched someone else make was a reminder of how fragile a career in the creative arts is.

I would eventually make my way onto the great stage of Marvel Comics and become the writer of Spider-Man (for the series *Ultimate Spider-Man*). As I stood on stage at the Eisners, shaking Will Eisner's hand as he gave me the award named after him, and all I could think was: "*You're giving me this too early. I'm still learning!!*"

Many years later, when I first moved to Portland, someone I admire a great deal, Dark Horse Executive Editor Diana Schutz, asked me if I would guest lecture her college class on graphic novels. "*NOW* there's a class on graphic novels??!!" She had been teaching for a while, and was using the growing comic book community in Portland as a fantastic resource to show her students a variety of opinions on a variety of subjects.

Speaking to her class over the next few years would always be an enjoyable experience and unusually fulfilling. Years later, when Portland State University asked her about starting a graphic novel class or

program, she told them to get me. She knew I was busy with my young children and career, but she insisted that they bully me into doing it. It didn't take long. I realized that everybody I admired in my life, past and present, was at one time or another a teacher. Including Walt Simonson.

So, though I never got to take the graphic novel college class I always dreamed of, I got to create it from scratch and share it with others.

For the last few years, I have been teaching graphic novel writing at Portland State University and I now teach for the University of Oregon, which, thanks to Professor Ben Saunders, has the first undergraduate degree in comics in the nation. And like Diana before me, I call upon my friends and colleagues to show my students all the choices that are in front of them.

What I am very proud of is that the class, and now this book, are not "How to Write like Brian Michael Bendis" lectures. I don't want you to write like me. I want *me* to write like me. If other people start writing like me, the value of my writing on the open market will go down considerably. Right now people who want a book that feels like it was written by me usually come to *me* first.

I don't want you to write like me. I want you to write like *you.*
I want to offer you what I know to be true: There is no right or wrong way to create a comic book. There are, like Robert McKee says, just "things that work." What's fascinating about this unique art form is that what works for me may not work for you, and what works for my good friends Ed Brubaker or Matt Fraction may not work for me.
This book came out of learning that lesson.

What I've done here is offer a "nuts and bolts" look at the creation of modern comics. At the same time, I provide a look into the minds of many of my collaborators and peers. They are the people that I go to for inspiration.

Also, you will find I have included a chapter about the business of comic book and graphic novel publishing. One of the things that even the most wonderful writers fail at is running their business. Your business is as important as your art. Every day there is a headline featuring the results of a creator's poor decision or a publisher's poor behavior. Art and business are equally important and forever tied. You fancy yourself an artist? Grow up. You run a business.
Buying this book shows me that you, like me, are hungry for information. Creating this book offered me the unique chance to simultaneously fulfill my most important life lessons: it made me very happy and allowed me to act like Walt Simonson.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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