



LETTER DRONE

ANNUAL #1

What to do when
Illustrator crashes.

How to make
butting bubbles.

Type choice - what
will work best for
your comic.

FEAR CATALYST



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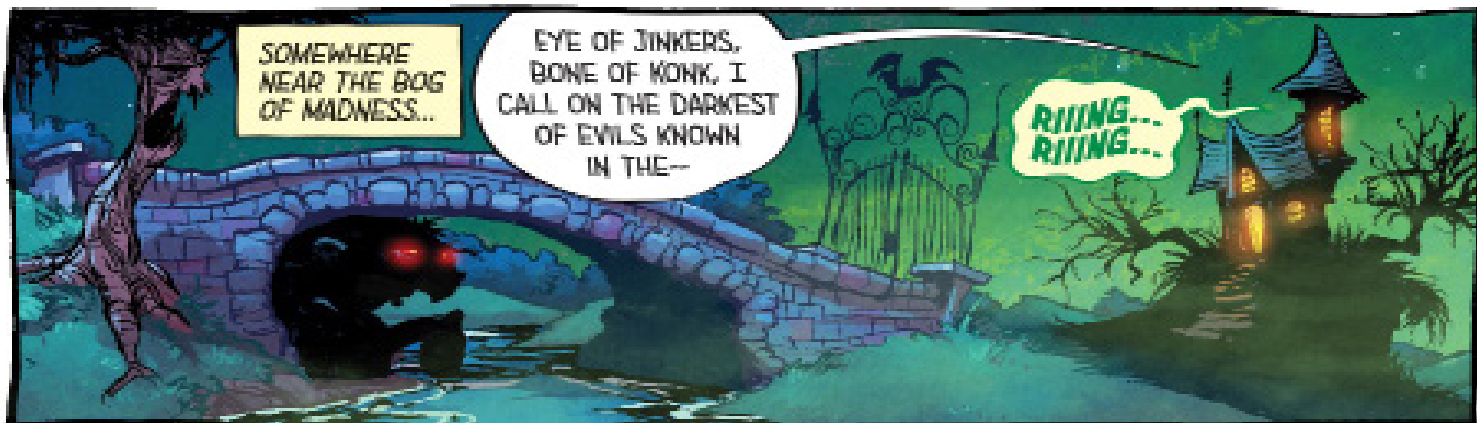


LETTERING REVIEW

I Hate Fairyland comes from the mind of Skottie Young (Rocket Raccoon, Wizard of Oz, Fortunately The Milk). It's a vicious deconstruction (perhaps decapitation is a better term for it) of the fairy tale genre. Readers follow Gert along her adventures to find the key back to her home. Her road hasn't been easy, she's had so much trouble finding the key that forty years have passed. There are witches, giants, fairy tale creatures, and a healthy dose of blood. If you can get past the cartoon gore, you'll find a funny, tongue-in-cheek examination into the simplicities of fairy tales. This is Skottie Young at his prime and he has never been better. Joined by superstar colorist, Jean-Francois Beaulieu, and legendary letterer, Nate Piekos, Young finally tells the fairy tale he's been waiting his whole career to tell. It is well worth the wait.

I Hate Fairyland is one of the newest titles that have featured the lettering talents of Nate Piekos. I Hate Fairyland is told with bizarre art and as such, requires an equally bizarre style of lettering. Nate unleashes all of his creative juices. He uses a handcrafted font, made specifically for I Hate Fairyland. The font is loose and when emphasis is needed the letter are bolded to a thick and rich look. The font is kind of wiggly and looks like something a child would write using sidewalk chalk. To match the loose font, the bubble design is also wiggly and not symmetrical. They are hand drawn in Illustrator so you won't get two of the same. This style of bubble carries the look of the art. The art is not clean or crisp by any means. The lines and proportions are exaggerated, dramatic, and extremely cartoony. Nate also has a lot of fun designing alternate bubble styles. What I mean by alternate are looks of bubbles as Gertrude speaks a line of dialogue through gritted teeth and the bottom of the bubble is jagged. One of the greatest strengths of this book is the color variation in the bubbles. The main characters, Gert, Larry, and Queen Cloudia, all talk with bubbles with white fills. The narrators (read the story and you'll find out why there is more than one) use a dull yellow fill. Both the captions and the bubbles of each narrator match colors. Keeping that color consistent throughout the whole series establishing a pattern for readers to look for. White means the characters are speaking, something other than white is either a narrator or another really important character than transcends the normalcy of the story, which is not normal at all to begin with. In issue one, there is a two page spread that I want to feature in this review. Nate Piekos is able to take something basic like lettering and contribute heavily to the story through his bubble designs and other little touches. Rather than explain it, I'll show you what I mean. Nate's amazing use of alternate bubble styles enhance this section of the story and include the lettering as an artistic tool to improve the experience of reading the story. What also plays into making this series so great is having panels that are blank. Now, this may not be the most appealing job for a letterer, but there





SOMEWHERE NEAR THE BOG OF MADNESS...

EYE OF JINKERS, BONE OF MONK, I CALL ON THE DARKEST OF EVILS KNOWN IN THE—

RIIING...
RIIING...



HUH-HUM THE **DARKEST** OF EVILS KNOWN IN—

RIIING...
RIIING...

OH COME ON! CAN'T A WITCH GET HER WITCHING ON IN PEACE?

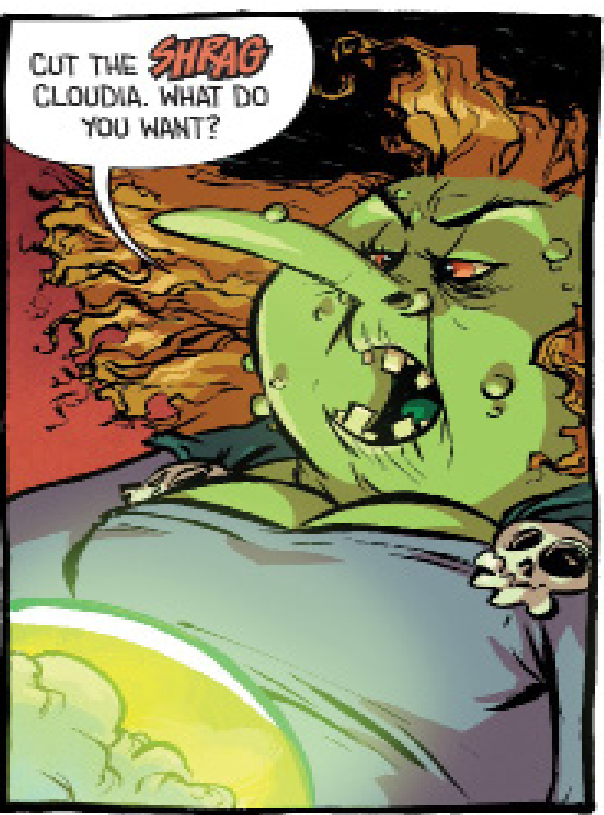


HELLO!

HORRIBELLA, SWEETIE! IT'S SO GOOD TO HEAR YOUR VOICE.



I'VE BEEN MEANING TO COME BY BRING A BOTTLE OF NECTAR AND—



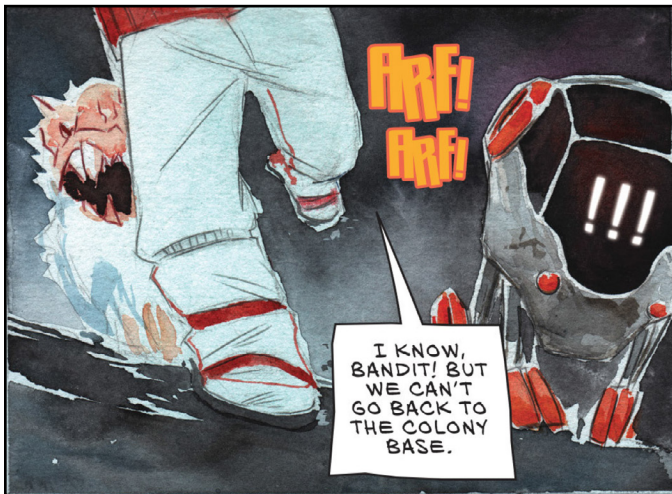
CUT THE **SHRAG** CLOUDIA. WHAT DO YOU WANT?



JUST AN ITSY-BITSY JOB. THE PAYS GREAT AND SHOULDN'T TAKE LONG AT ALL FOR A WITCH AS POWERFUL AS YOURSELF. HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT, LET'S SAY...

...KILLING GERTRUDE?

is a huge benefit to knowing when not to do anything. Of course, the writer does have control over when to leave out text, but letterers need to not take that personally. Many sections of *I Hate Fairyland* are told without any dialogue. Lastly, there are many sound effects in *I Hate Fairyland*. A number of them are hand drawn by Skottie Young. While letterers may think that is a benefit and you won't have to produce SFX, it can be more challenging to match a style that the artist does by hand. It takes a crafty designer to have the transition between hand drawn and computer lettered sound effects be seamless. Nate Piekos demonstrates his masterful techniques throughout every page of this series. This is a great series to study for letterers who want to expand their abilities past preprogrammed texts and easy SFX.



BUBBLE BASICS

The power of Illustrator to create unique and eye-appealing dialogue bubbles is vast! With so many comics looking so different, let's talk about how to make your bubbles unique and stand out. Bubble shapes, tail shapes, and bubble positioning are all important to making your comic project read the best that it can. There is so much creative freedom involved in comic book lettering that there can almost be too much freedom with creation. There are basic ideas that help ground creators and let them work within the proper sphere to make great looking bubbles that help comic book readers follow the story.

Bubble Shapes

Choosing the proper dialogue bubble style can be very difficult. There are so many options to include in your comics that it can almost be overwhelming to narrow down the selection. Thankfully, there is an easy way to create custom dialogue bubbles to develop your own style. Let's walk through what the different bubbles are called and how they can work within the various styles of comics that exist. Traditional ellipses are formed straight from selecting the ellipses tool and forming a shape—no editing reforming, nothing. Just drag and go. A lot of indie books use this style, it's fast and works well for larger chunks of text. Its downside is that there is a lot of empty space if only few words are going in the bubble. For a more professional and mainstream look, letterers need to take advantage of the editing capabilities in Illustrator to alter their dialogue bubbles. To do that, select your ellipses, go to the Select menu at the top of the screen, slide down to object and select "Direction Handles". You'll notice four lines with little orbs on each end pop up. That's good. Those can be used to alter each side individually. To alter the whole shape at once keep that ellipses selected with the direction handles and go to the side menu on the left and look for the Scale tool, it's under the eraser tool. Double click "Scale" and a window will pop up. This

is what you use to edit your bubble. Click the preview button at the bottom, that way you'll have a moment-to-moment update with how your ellipses is being reshaped. Making sure the Uniform circle is clicked, begin adjusting the value to over 100%. Where you stop really depends on the look you want for your dialogue bubble. Industry standards say that around 103-108% is sufficient. Play around with it and find something that you like. That type of bubble design allows for custom alteration and matches more closely the look of lettering in Marvel and DC books. It is sometimes also referred to as "Television Bubbles" because you can tweak the shape to look like an old-school television screen. Now that you have the ability to alter your bubbles, stroke is the next problem to worry about. Stroke is fairly standard and varies only a little. Thinner stroke is nice to help the bubbles not stand out. A thicker stroke can be nice to compliment the line art if the artist uses bolder lines. Of course, certain artistic situations override those suggestions. High emotion, tense or suspenseful, and action scenes can all be reason to alter the stroke thickness to create a different effect. Hopefully these suggestions get you thinking about ways to start your lettering adventure or ways to freshen the projects you work on.

Tail Shapes

Along with bubble styles, the choice of bubble tails is also important to consider for your lettering project. There are a few basic options that are available to letterers for regular conversation bubble tails: straight and curves. Letterers have been playing around more with straight line tails such as those seen in *Drifter* and *Deadly Class*. Let's talk about straight tails. Straight tails can be a huge benefit in keeping the lettering unnoticeable. Stories like *East of West*, *Manhattan Projects*, and *Rumble*, all keep tails simple and straight. They show the dialogue and the simple line connects the bubble to the character without much trouble. In comics like *Manifest Destiny*, *Amazing Spider-Man*, or *Batman* a curve bubble tail is used. The curve can sometimes be distracting because rather than a straight line to the character, the curve can be distracting as readers have to follow the motion of the curve to whichever character is speaking. Yet, it follows the more traditional look for comics and some readers won't have a problem with them. Most important to remember when using bubble tails is to maintain the same thickness of the tail through the entire project. That uniformity will be a huge asset to your work. Readers don't want a thin tail in one bubble and a huge tail in the other. The more accurate you can be through your piece—the better. Be

Positioning

The real trick to being an effective letterer once you have created an effective bubble and tail style is to position the bubbles through the page to tell the story indiscreetly. To letter in a way that tells the story and go unnoticed at the same time is tricky. There are simple principles to remember that can have a large impact on the overall look and reading experience for your project. Let's take basics! In western civilization, we read left to right—that means you want the person who speaks first to have their bubble closest to the top left corner. This may be frustrating—especially if the artist goofs up and draws the characters in the wrong order. Like a novel, start lettering in the top left and work your way across and down, like the reading a piece of prose. Of course, the art will dictate where the bubbles go but that doesn't mean they are exclusive to one location. Because artists work so hard to bring the story to



sure to choose the same stroke as the bubbles, otherwise when you merge the shapes the strokes will be reset and you'll have to change each object over again. What is really helpful with making the tail and bubble into a compound that is that you can separate them at any time. I find that with uniting you cannot separate very easily. Also, with compound shapes you can still alter the shape without a lot of hassle. You double click the object—that will isolate the bubble and allow you to work on only that object. Then you can select either the bubble or the tail and move, resize, or rotate to get the desired look without taking it apart. Tails are extremely important since they direct the reader's eye to the character and help tell the story. The best way to learn what tail works is to read comics; take time to see how each style affects the reading experience and then practice doing the same thing in your work.



life, avoid covering their work. They should leave spaces for bubbles and even if they don't, never cover a part of a character's face. Make sure each character is identifiable and viewable by the reader. There is a lot of freedom available to letterers to increase the reading experience of a comic. The artist does a lot of the heavy lifting, the colorist adds their fine touches, and a letterer has the power to guide the reader through the whole experience. The transition from bubble to bubble should be seamless. Avoid leaving placing a bubble at the top and the rest at the bottom. Again, think about how easy it is to read a book. Everything is on the same line. You want to have that same effect in comics. As readers take in the dialogue bubbles they should also be viewing the art in a way to bring out the most stunning and visually engaging pieces of a scene. Letters are extremely important for comics and can be used to heighten the experience of a series to detract from it. As you work on your next project, think about how a reader will take in the page and try new techniques to alter the reading experience.

Dos and Don'ts

In the world of comic book lettering, a lot of simple secrets can increase your skill very quickly. There are certain design principles that must be followed and some errors that must be avoided in order to have a great lettering look. Some of these may seem like common sense but they are always important to remember.

Dos

Space inside of a dialogue bubble is necessary. You do not want your dialogue to be cramped next to the edges of the bubble or caption box. How much space is too much space? The answer to that really depends on you. You have control over the space used in your bubbles and captions and that will affect how much of the original artwork get covered. If you're lettering a book where a lot of high action scenes take place, don't cover the art with your lettering, let the art shine. But don't forget that not enough space is always not enough. You can get away with a little too much space, but if things are too tight, people will notice.

Use the "Strong" style of font. This is a specific style of type available in Photoshop and Illustrator. Choosing this style of font gives the dialogue a look that adds a stability to the lettering. Because it is thicker than sharp. It is the most common look across the comic industry. It's easy to change under the Character menu on Illustrator.

Font choice for your project will have a huge impact on how it turns out. Comic books don't use fonts that you'd see in a professional essay or a novel. There is way more room to play around than simply using Time New Roman. Letterers have the fun of playing around with all kinds of fonts. Sometimes the project lead will have a specific font in mind. That makes a project a lot easier and you simply have to find the font online. However, when you are left to fend for yourself, the experience is way better.



Don'ts

Artists work really hard on the artwork—don't cover their hard work with your lettering. Especially important is not covering faces. Give the characters space—personal bubble. Shoulders, elbows, legs are alright to cover—faces, hands, and other elements of the body that are important to action should not be covered. Use the butting bubble technique to give characters space in scenes.

Lettering busy panels with a lot of conversation can be very difficult. In order to not make the reading experience confusing for readers, do not crisscross the bubble tails. You need to make the bubble path as clear as possible. That might mean positioning the tail of one character's bubble pointing up, and the tail of another pointing down, rather than having them overlap.

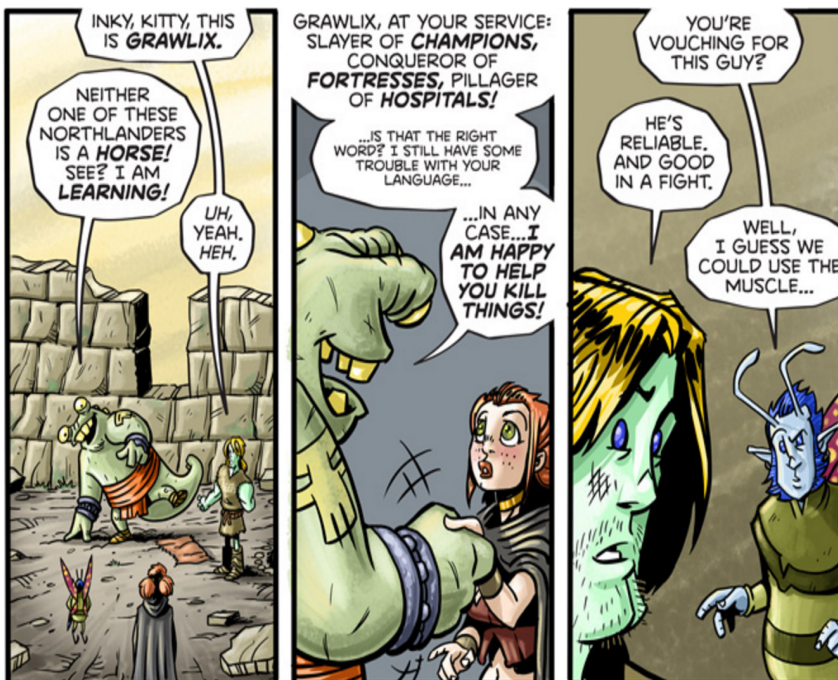
Finally, when lettering a conversation that bounces between two characters (otherwise known as ping pong) it is important to not overlap connecting tails with bubbles. What that looks like is seeing each connection between each bubble. As tempting as it might be to cover up the connections, it is not the industry standard practice to do so.



LETTERER PROFILE

Nate Piekos - Blambot

Nate Piekos (also known as Blambot) is a graduate from the Rhode Island College. Nate graduated in 1998 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in graphic design. Branding himself as Blambot, Nate jumped into the comic book world with both feet. He soon scored jobs at Marvel Comics, DC Comics, Dark Horse Comics, and Image comics, not to mention frequent indie publishers and projects. On top of his gigs in the comic book industry, Nate has done work for video games, television, motion pictures, and packaging for various products. Nate has designed a large library of fonts. He is an advocate for new creators using his fonts to letter their projects. The titles Nate has lettered are numerous, those most notable are: Black Beetle, Captain Midnight, The Immortal Iron Fist, Eight, I Hate Fairyland, Huck, Madman, Umbrella Academy, and X-Men First Class. He focuses highly on his craft, often posting photo updates of current projects, stages of lettering designs, and multiple tips and tricks about comic book lettering. Nate has even made such a ripple in the industry that he has many numerous awards to his name: 2014 Horror News Network Award for Horror Letter, 2014 SciFi Pulse Award for Best Letterer, 2012 Ghastly Award for Best Horror Letter; not to mention the frequent other nominations. Since the comic industry has undergone such a shift through the years, Nate has transitioned to sole digital lettering, saving traditional for logo/sound effect design. His main weapon of choice is a Wacom Cintiq 24HD. Nate compares his designing of fonts to music, "Will we ever run out of songs?" There is so much personality that can come through different



fonts, just like music, and Nate captures that personality with every font he designs. That is where so much freedom in this comic industry comes from. Each collaborator has their own experiences, background, and preferences for storytelling. Nate's unique sense of design and creation has impacted many creators and he's creations are a great starter for those looking to break into comics. Nate's own personal creative endeavors include a webcomic known as Atland. Atland grew from the people and places all around him as well as aspects of his own personality. Fantasy has always fueled him and Atland is a chance to give back to the stories that inspired him as a child. Because of the massive volume of work produced by Nate Piekos and his contribution the indie comic realm, he is a force to be reckoned with. His example inspires creators and storyteller to work harder to make their mark on the industry and leave a lasting legacy like Blambot.