

HOW TO MAKE COMICS... THE *SMASH* WAY!



From the creators of
Smash: Trial by Fire

MAKING SMASH!

My brother Kyle and I grew up reading and loving comic books. It was always our dream to make one of our own. Even though Kyle is an artist and I'm a writer, many years passed before we worked together to create our comic series.

Smash is the story of a 10-year-old boy named Andrew Ryan, who absorbs the powers of his superhero idol, Defender. Wearing a homemade Halloween costume and calling himself "**Smash**," Andrew sets out to fight crime and protect the innocent. He also has to deal with the usual problems of being a fifth-grader: parents and their rules, homework, bullies, early curfew, and an older brother who bosses him around.

Kyle and I started making *Smash* by asking ourselves what kind of comic we always wanted to read when we were kids. We loved superheroes like Spider-Man and Batman, but we each wished we could have powers of our so we could be a *kid* who fights crime.

Presto: *Smash* was born!

In case you've ever wanted to create your own comic, here are some tips on how we made it work.

1. OUTLINE

First, we had to agree on the story. We talked a lot about what we wanted to see in the book: a boy who has super-powers but doesn't get the hang of them right away. Smash can fly, but he's also afraid of heights -- so he doesn't fly very far off the ground!

Since I'm a writer, I sat down and wrote an *outline*. This is a brief description of everything that happens to every character in the comic.

There's a lot missing, like the words the characters say to each other (*dialogue*), the action scenes, and all the other parts that make a story entertaining. In an outline, you just want to tell the bare-bones of the story as simply as possible so you know the plot of your book.

When Kyle and I plotted the story for *Smash*, we sometimes had different ideas. If you have to work with another person, there's a very important word you need to learn that will help you get along: **compromise!**

com·pro·mise [kom-pruh-mahyz] *noun*

1. a settlement of differences by mutual concessions; an agreement reached by adjustment of conflicting or opposing claims, principles, etc., by reciprocal modification of demands.
2. the result of such a settlement.

If you have one idea and the person you're working with has a very different idea, compromise means you try to make *both* ideas work. Or else you try to come up with a third idea that you can both agree on.

For instance, if I want Smash to have a red mask and Kyle wants his mask to be blue, we can compromise and make it *both* colors. Now Smash has a blue hood and red goggles. Hooray, we both win!

Right now Kyle and I are working on Book 2 of *Smash*. Here's a scene from the outline, which I wrote after Kyle and I agreed on what we want to happen in the book:

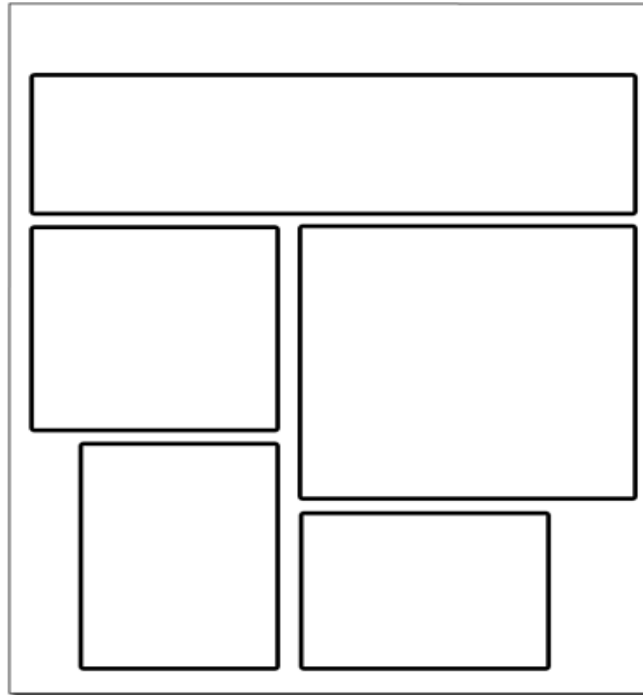
ANDREW RYAN wakes up from a horrible nightmare, and is relieved to find he's in his own bed -- and it's Saturday! He spends the morning watching cartoons, playing video games with his brother TOMMY, and reading comic books -- until JOHN HARRIS (a.k.a. the WRAITH) drops by. ANDREW forgot he was supposed to be in training today! HARRIS punishes ANDREW by making him mop the floor, paint his fence, and wash his car.

Notice how it's just a brief description of the action. We don't know what the characters actually say to each other, how many panels the page will have, what their clothes look like, or anything like that. It's just the plot.

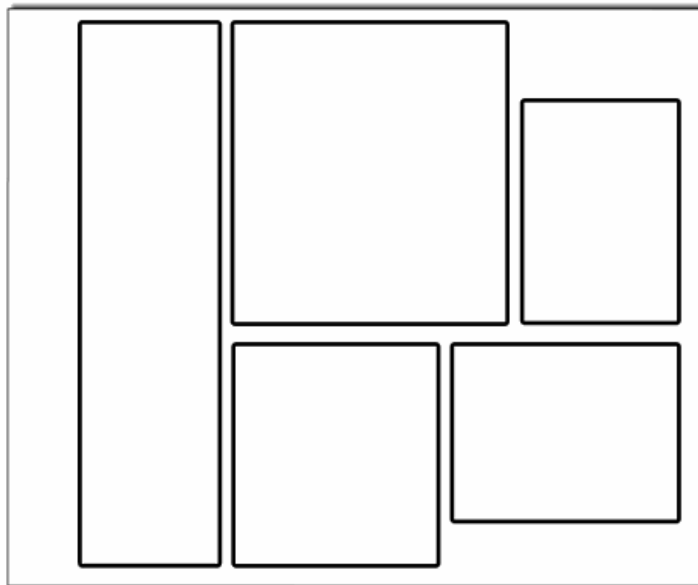
When Kyle and I agree on the outline, then I start working on...

2. SCRIPT

Here's the basic layout for a blank comic page:



The page consists of several *panels* blocked off inside a *border* with a narrow space between them, called the *gutter*. Kyle and I use a horizontal page for *Smash*, which is like taking a normal comic page and laying it on its side, like this:



Before Kyle draws the panels, he needs to know how many panels will be on each page and what to put in those panels. That's where I come in!

In the script, I write a description of what we see in each panel. I also write the dialogue to show who says what, and when. For instance, here's my script for the scene in the outline where Andrew Ryan has to do chores for a retired superhero named John Harris:

PAGE 18 (FOUR PANELS)

PANEL ONE

Andrew pushes a mop across Harris's kitchen floor, clearly annoyed. Harris stands nearby, watching.

CAPTION
AND SO...

HARRIS
MISSED A SPOT.

PANEL TWO

Outside, Andrew uses a shammy to wax Harris's car (an old beater that's barely worth the effort). Harris lounges on a hammock nearby.

HARRIS
WIPE HARDER. I WANT TO BE ABLE TO SEE MY
FACE IN IT.

ANDREW (THOUGHT)
WHY WOULD ANYONE WANNA SEE THAT?

PANEL THREE

Andrew is on his hands and knees in the front yard, painting Harris's picket fence. He has paint smudges all over his face, which is clenched in misery. Harris stands behind him, sipping a tall glass of lemonade.

HARRIS
REMEMBER, TWO COATS. TWO!

ANDREW
WHY AM I PAINTING YOUR STUPID FENCE?

PANEL FOUR

Andrew angrily flings the brush into the paint can.

ANDREW
AND MOPPING YOUR FLOOR! AND TAKING OUT
YOUR RECYCLING! AND...

SFX
THUNK!

It might look complicated, but the elements of a script are pretty simple.

I list the page number at the top. This is page 18 of Book 2. I put the total number of panels in parentheses () so Kyle knows exactly how many he has to draw.

Then I write a brief description of each panel. I indent the dialogue so it stands out from the action. That way, with just a quick glance at a script page, Kyle knows exactly which part he has to draw and which part will go into word balloons.

I write the name of each character speaking, then their dialogue. Sometimes I use parentheses after the name to indicate whether the dialogue is in a thought balloon or if the character who's speaking is off-panel, like someone yelling from another room.

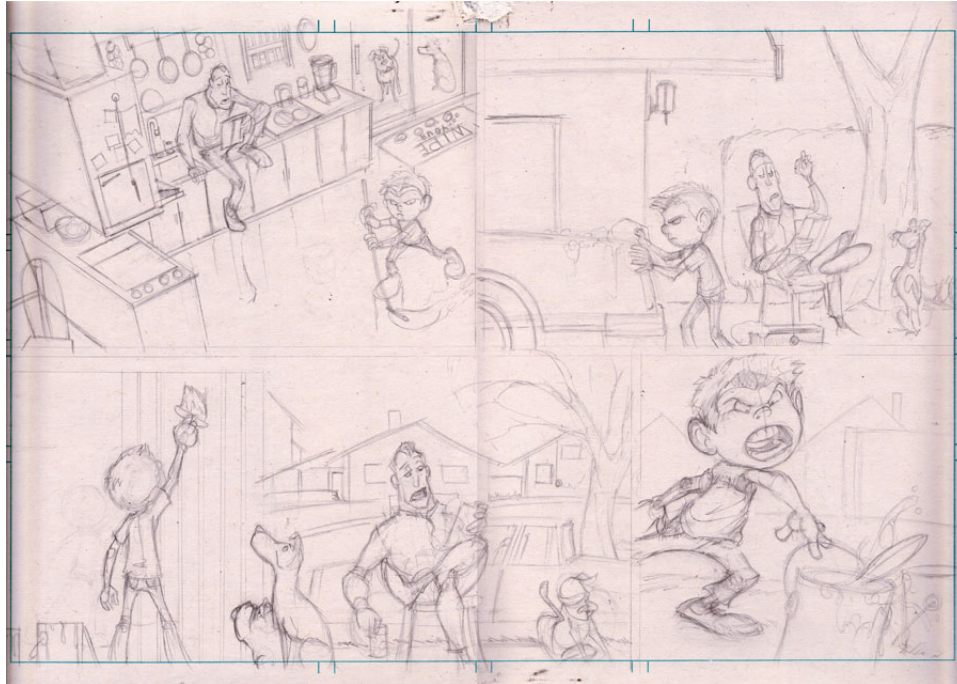
If there's a noise in the panel, I write that under SFX (which is shorthand for "sound effects"). This is where I put sounds like *WHAP!*, *THUD!*, or *SPLAT!* I always write these sounds after the dialogue in each panel so it stands apart from the word balloons.

3. DRAWING

Now comes the part where Kyle turns my script page into a work of comic art.

First, he starts with a light sketch. Kyle draws rough versions of the characters and the background, just enough to give the idea of what it will look like. Then he shows it to me and we talk about any changes he should make.

Here is his rough-penciled version of the script page I showed you:



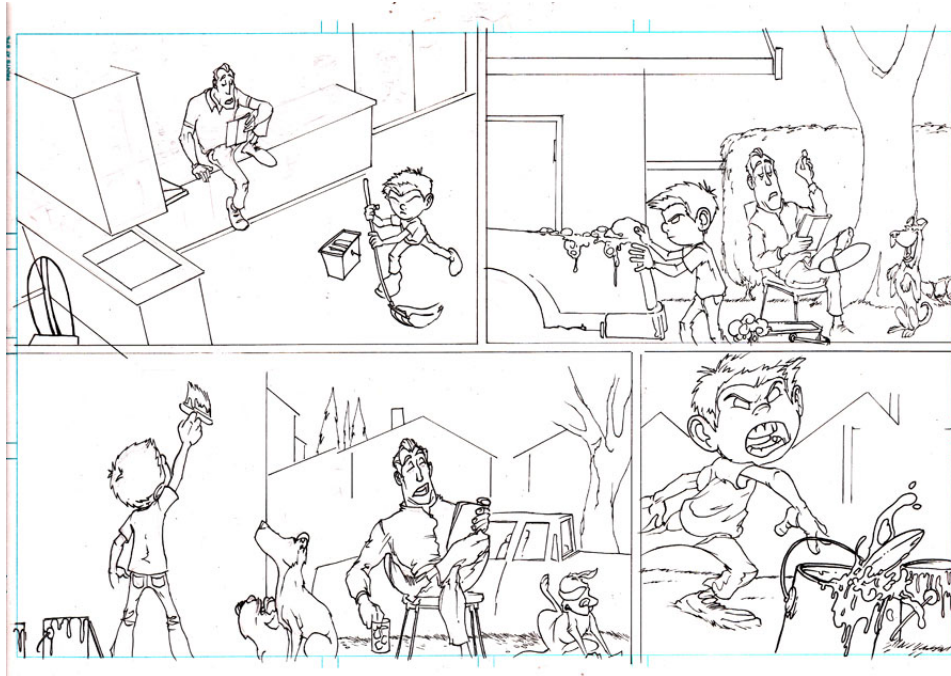
With this page, Kyle first drew Andrew in panel 1 with his back turned while he mopped the floor. I said it would look better if we could see the expression on Andrew's face when he's dragging the mop, so Kyle turned him around.

Kyle sometimes makes little changes. You'll notice the script had John Harris lying in a hammock in panel 2, but Kyle drew him sitting in a chair. Little things like that are fine; it's when Kyle changes something *big* that we have to figure out a fix! If he suddenly drew Andrew with a mohawk on this page, we'd discuss (in calm, quiet voices) whether Kyle should redraw the whole thing, or I should add some dialogue like:

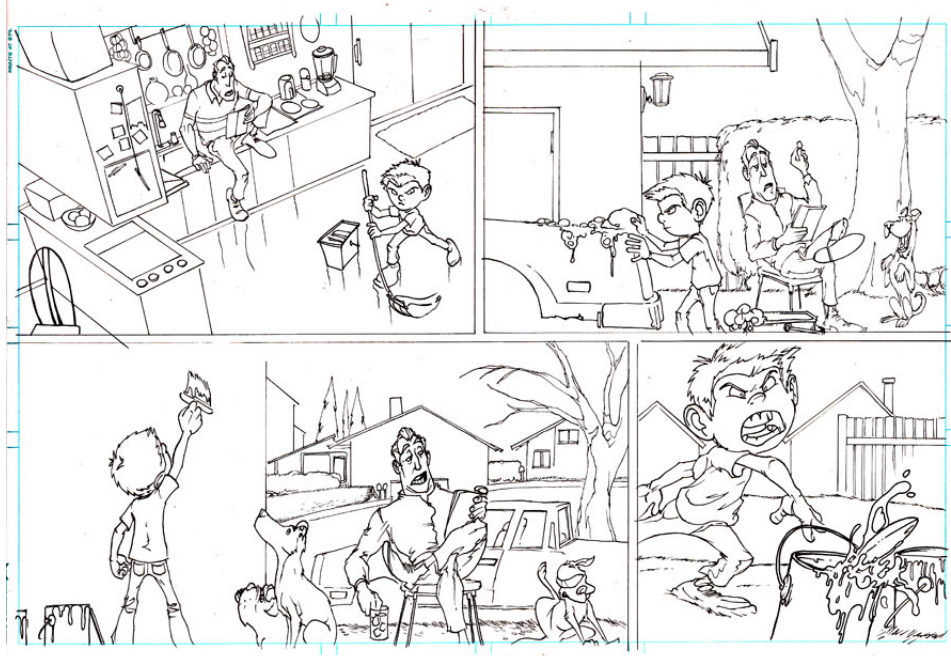
ANDREW: Hey, you haven't even mentioned my awesome new haircut!

JOHN HARRIS: I'm really trying not to...

Once we're both happy with the page, Kyle goes over his pencil art with an ink pen to make the lines darker and easier to see.



Now the inked outlines look like a page in a coloring book. Kyle fills in details, along with texture and shadows. Notice the details he added to make the kitchen seem more real, and how he filled in the background of the other panels:



Helpful Tip: If you're just starting out, keep things simple! Begin with simple drawings that help you tell the story in a clean, easy way. If you try to cram too much artwork into one panel or add a ton of lines for detail, your picture might be confusing. Master the basics of telling a story through artwork before you start getting fancy!

4. LETTERING

Once the page is completely drawn and inked, you're ready to put the dialogue in place. All of the dialogue goes in ovals called *word balloons*. These have a little tail (sometimes called a "carrot") pointing to the person who's speaking them.

When a character is thinking something, put it in a *thought balloon* that looks like a fluffy cloud. Use a trail of little dots instead of a carrot-shaped tail to show who's thinking it.

Back in the "olden days," before computers, people called *letterers* had to cut word balloons out of a separate piece of paper. Then they used glue or rubber cement to put the balloons onto the page. This method still works, if you like cutting and pasting.

Welcome to the digital age! If you're good with a computer and own a visual design program like PhotoShop or Adobe Illustrator, you can scan the page of artwork and add the dialogue balloons right on your monitor. No gluey fingers or wasted paper!

5. COLORING

Your comic can be in black-and-white or in color. Since it takes a long time to color a whole page, Kyle and I bring in another person for that, who's called a *colorist*.

We haven't reached the coloring phase of Book 2 yet. If you want to see what our finished comic looks like in color, check out our book ***Smash: Trial by Fire***.

As with the lettering, colors can be done by hand, using paints, colored pencils, crayons, or whatever you like.

You can also use a design program like PhotoShop to fill in the colors with paint buckets and loads of special features. This can get very complicated, so you might want to just start out with some simple watercolor paints until you get the hang of it.

And then... guess what?

You've just made a comic!

CONGRATULATIONS! Be sure to share your work with friends and family members so they can "ooh" and "ahh" at your brilliance.

PUT IT ALL TOGETHER!

Here's a brief summary of the steps to make your comic:

1. Start with the outline. A short description of the plot of your story. If you're working with another person, make sure you both agree on the story *before* you start scripting or drawing. This will prevent a lot of fights later on!

2. Scripting. Write a description of what happens in each panel on every page. Keep in mind that the more panels you have on one page, the smaller and more crowded those panels will have to be. If you write a page with only four panels, there will be more room for great, eye-catching artwork than if the artist has to cram ten tiny panels onto a single piece of paper.

3. Drawing. Start with pencil sketches that can be easily erased if you make a mistake or have to change something. When everything is right where you want it to be, outline your drawings in ink to darken the lines. Finally, add background details to give a better sense of place.

4. Lettering. This is where you put the words from the script onto the page of artwork. The old-fashioned method was to cut word balloons out from a piece of paper and then glue or rubber-cement it on top of the page of art. Nowadays, if you're good with a computer, you can use a program like PhotoShop or Adobe Illustrator to add the word balloons and type the text inside them. Try not to cover up too much of the artwork!

5. Coloring. This is optional. Jeff Smith's popular comic *Bone* was originally published in black-and-white. The comic was digitally colored and republished in graphic novels that became hugely successful. Color or black-and-white... the choice is yours!

6. Share your work! What fun is a comic if nobody reads it? Show it to your friends and family. Don't be shy! If one person doesn't like it, another person might! Sometimes people will point out problems that you can fix in your next comic. You'll get better with every new work!

Have any questions? Send us an email at smashcomic@gmail.com and we'll try to answer them.

Don't forget to have fun!