

Make Comics Like the Pros: The Inside Scoop on How to Write, Draw, and Sell Your Comic Books and Graphic Novels

By Greg Pak, Fred Van Lente

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A step-by-step guide to all aspects of comic book creation--from conceptualization to early drafts to marketing and promotion--written by two of the industry's most seasoned and successful pros.

Discover the Secrets of Your Favorite Comic Book Creators

Do you want to break into the comics industry? There are many creative roles available—writer, penciller, inker, colorist, letterer, editor, and more. Each creator serves a vital function in the production of sequential art at companies such as DC, Marvel, Image, and Valiant. In *Make Comics Like the Pros*, veteran comics creators Greg Pak and Fred Van Lente team up with a who's who of the modern comic book scene to lead you step-by-step through the development of a comic. With these two fan-favorite writers as your guides, you'll learn everything from script formatting to the importance of artistic collaboration to the best strategies for promoting and selling your own sequential art masterpiece. Pak and Van Lente even put their lessons into practice inside the pages of the book—pairing with Eisner Award–winning cartoonist Colleen Coover (*Bandette*) to produce the swashbuckling, adventure comic *Swordmaids*, and giving you front row seats to their creative process. *Make Comics Like the Pros* provides all the answers you've been seeking to take your comic book–making dreams all the way to professional-level reality.

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Editorial Review

Review

"A must for every would-be comics makers library—and probably for every working pro as a brush up."
—*Publisher's Weekly*

Make Comics Like the Pros is an excellent resource for those wanting to break into writing comics... The writing is engaging, entertaining, and informative, and the book is full of insights from other comic pros.
—Josh Begley, *The Fandom Post*

"*Make Comics Like the Pros*, of all the How To books I've reviewed in recent memory, is the best. If you can read only one, make it this one."
—Augie De Blicek Jr., *Comic Book Resources*

About the Author

GREG PAK is an award-winning comic book writer and filmmaker currently writing *Batman/Superman* and *Action Comics* for DC Comics, *Turok Dinosaur Hunter* for Dynamite Entertainment, and *Eternal Warrior* for Valiant Comics. He directed the award-winning feature film *Robot Stories*, wrote the epic "Planet Hulk" and "World War Hulk" comic storylines, and co-wrote (with Fred Van Lente) fan-favorite *Incredible Hercules* for Marvel Comics.

FRED VAN LENTE is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Marvel Zombies*, *Incredible Hercules* (with Pak), *Odd Is on Our Side* (with Dean R. Koontz), and the American Library Association award-winning *Action Philosophers*. His original graphic novel *Cowboys & Aliens* (co-written with Andrew Foley) was the basis for the major motion picture. Van Lente's other comics include *The Comic Book History of Comics*, *Archer & Armstrong*, and *The Amazing Spider-Man*.

Pak and Van Lente are both residents of New York City.

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Introduction

Welcome to *Make Comics Like the Pros*, a practical compendium of everything that we—veteran comic book creators Greg Pak and Fred Van Lente—have learned while hammering out thousands of comic book script pages and working with hundreds of collaborators over the last decade. Here you'll find step-by-step strategies for how to drag your comic out of your brain, with invaluable advice on writing, drawing, coloring, and lettering. And we'll help you build your strategy for getting your book out into the world with from-the-front-lines tips on pitching, publishing, and promotion.

Throughout, we'll make our pointers as practical and hands-on as possible with play-by-play commentary on the creation of a brand-new comic book story written by us and drawn by the brilliant Colleen Coover. Whether you're a total beginner or an experienced pro, you're about to dive into a giant pool of awesome directly relevant to whatever your interests in comics creation may be.

But we're going to spill our biggest secret right up front: the big theme of this book—and the key to making comics like the pros—is *collaboration*.

At the minimum, the production of a typical comic book requires a writer, an editor, an artist, a letterer, a printer, a publicist, and a distributor. In theory, all of those jobs can be filled by one person, especially in the digital age. But most comics are created by a team, and the vast majority of comic book creators—and by “creators,” we mean *everyone* who works on the book—need to learn how to talk to and work with everybody at every stage of the process.

And you guessed it: this book will help you do exactly those things.

The wrong way to frame all of this is that if you’re making comics, you need to learn how to get all of your collaborators to see things the way you do and fricking *do* it already.

The reality is that great comics come from *true* collaboration, with genuine give-and-take through which smart creators learn from their colleagues and end up with a far better final product than they ever could have produced on their own.

We’d all like to pretend we’re incandescent geniuses who drip perfection from every pen stroke or keyboard tap.

But to reach our potential, we need a sounding board and honest critique. On a creative level, true collaboration means you have someone to call you on your cheap tricks, push you to improve, and surprise you with new ideas and possibilities.

We’re going to explore every creative relationship in comics—unveiling how letterers, colorists, editors, writers, and artists all can work together for maximum impact. But to lay the groundwork for all of our conversations about collaboration, first we’ll tell you a little bit about ourselves and how we started collaborating with each other, which should show you that while there’s a way to make comics like the pros, there are as many paths to *becoming* a pro as there are pros themselves.

Who We Are and How We Came to Be

Ever since he was very young, Fred knew he wanted to be a writer; he just wasn’t sure what kind. His dad was a casual comics fan and a lot of his funny books fell into Fred’s hands at an early age—by the time Fred entered kindergarten, he could read thanks to all the old comics he devoured! But he was also into prose writing and interested in screenwriting, and went to Syracuse University to study film.

Greg knew he wanted to be a writer by the time he was nine years old and Ray Bradbury had become his patron saint. Greg wrote short stories throughout middle school, high school, and college. He also grew up drawing all the time—his mother bought her kids crayons and blank paper instead of coloring books. But at some point, Greg stopped thinking of creative work as a career. He kept cartooning and writing through high school and college and beyond, but he studied political science as an undergrad at Yale University and then went home to Texas to work on the first gubernatorial campaign of the great Ann Richards.

Fred enjoyed moviemaking but had even more fun hanging out with the students studying to be comics artists in the Illustration Department down the hall. He really loved the way they brought his ideas to life, so after school, he moved to New York City to try to break into the comics industry with them. It took many long years, because it required juggling several (usually pretty terrible) temp jobs at a time, but he and two fellow Syracuse University alums, artists Steve Ellis and Ryan Dunlavey, managed to create small-press titles like *Stuperpowers!*, *Tranquility*, *Action Philosophers*, and *The Silencers*. Though none of these titles was a huge seller, people in charge read them and liked them and gave Fred work. Platinum Studios, the film company that optioned *Tranquility*, a near-future sci-fi thriller, gave Fred the job to write *Cowboys & Aliens*, the comic that the 2011 movie was based on.

After working in Texas politics for a year, Greg snagged a Rhodes scholarship to study history at Oxford University, ostensibly in order to become a better politician. But at Oxford, Greg had the chance for the first time to get involved with a student filmmaking group, and all the lights came on. After Oxford, Greg moved to New York City to attend NYU's graduate film program. After years of making shorts, he directed the independent sci-fi feature film *Robot Stories*. Then one day his agent called up to say Marvel was looking for new comic book writers and would he be interested?

Meanwhile, it was Fred's super-noir crime series he created with artist Steve Ellis, *The Silencers*, that attracted the eye of editor Mark Panicia at Marvel, and he invited Fred to pitch for the company's *Amazing Fantasy* anthology title. Fred's pitch was initially rejected, but he got a call when the original writer had to be let go (the classic understudy-makes-good story isn't limited to Broadway). From there, Fred got steady offers to write for the company's kids' line, with books like *Marvel Adventures Iron Man* and *Wolverine: First Class*, as well as off-beat titles like the supervillain heist *MODOK's 11* and short stories here and there.

Greg's first Marvel project was the 2004 *Warlock* miniseries illustrated by Charlie Adlard. Then Greg got tapped for the *X-Men: Phoenix—Endsong* miniseries, illustrated by Greg Land, which hit the top ten in sales the month it debuted. After writing a slew of miniseries, Greg finally got a shot at an ongoing with the "Planet Hulk" story that began in *Incredible Hulk* #92 and eventually led to *World War Hulk*, Marvel's big 2007 summer comics event.

Before we met, neither of us had cowritten any comics. But in 2007, as Greg was finishing up *World War Hulk*, he pitched the idea of an ongoing series starring the Renegades, a group of Marvel heroes who were crazy enough to side with the Hulk during his recent war in New York. Greg's writing schedule was pretty packed, and Marvel editor Nate Cosby suggested he consider cowriting the new project with this dude named Fred.

So we met in a Tex-Mex restaurant during a New York City snowstorm and, as Nate had anticipated, immediately hit it off. We had a blast working on the Renegades pitch, which ended up getting rejected because of a glut of new team books at Marvel at the time. But a few weeks later, we got a call asking if we'd be interested in reworking the pitch as a buddy book starring just two of the Renegades: Hercules and Amadeus Cho, the most incorrigible Greek demigod and the craziest kid genius in the Marvel Universe.

We said sure, and ended up writing over fifty issues of Hercules and Amadeus stories over the next five years.

Some cowriting teams divide their work according to task—with Writer A plotting and Writer B fleshing the stories out into complete scripts with dialogue, for example. But we never even tried that route; both of us immediately and instinctively knew that to reap the real creative rewards and fun of collaboration, we needed to be equally involved in every step of the process. Here's how we went about it: We'd usually start each new story arc by tossing around ideas over burgers in a dive somewhere in New York. From the beginning, one clear virtue of collaboration was that it prevented us from deep-sixing our own best ideas.

Every great, world-changing story idea probably sounded really stupid the first time someone articulated it: "An alien in tights and a cape who jumps around and punches bad guys? Come on." Sure, sometimes we need to let our dumb ideas quietly die. But when we were mulling over a Hercules story to tie into Marvel's 2008 *Secret Invasion* (an event featuring the alien Skrulls), Fred allowed himself to mention what he thought was one of his dumber ideas: that Hercules should go on a quest to kill the Skrull gods. And Greg said, "That's perfect!" The story became one of the most lauded of our *Incredible Hercules* run.

A big part of what made our collaboration work was that we shared a shameless willingness to jump on the best idea in the room. We'd fight passionately for what we thought was the most effective angle for a story or scene. But the minute the other guy came up with something better, we'd turn on a dime and embrace it. There's a strange and wonderful kind of selflessness that collaboration can encourage. If you're working with a good partner (and if you don't have a cowriter, this could be your editor or your artist), you don't have to fear anything—you know you're both just trying to figure out the best way to tell the best story possible, and you're both going to get equal credit for the success and failure of your work.

When it came to the practical task of putting words on pages, one of us would write up a first draft of a story outline after our face-to-face story meeting. Then the other would edit it and send it back to the first guy, who would edit it and send it back to the second guy, and so on until we were both satisfied. Then we'd repeat the process for the page-by-page outline for the individual script. And then we'd divide up the script, each of us taking an equal number of pages to write. Sometimes, we'd split it right down the middle, with one of us writing the first half and the other guy writing the second. Other times, if one of us had a special affinity for or understanding of a certain section of the script, we might divide things a little differently, with Greg writing the opening and closing, for example, and Fred writing the middle.

But as always, we'd trade those script pages back and forth, editing each other until we were both happy.

Editing each other might be the scariest words for new writers in the paragraph above. But give and you shall receive. When you give your cowriter permission to dig into your precious words without restraint, you end up looking much, much smarter, funnier, and wiser. Greg readily admits that he'd often cram in three too many jokes on certain pages or panels, leaving it to Fred to do the dirty work of cutting one or two. (Or all of them.) But knowing he had backup meant that each guy could run a bit wild and try things out. So in every issue, we'd streamline each other's dialogue, clarify panel descriptions, and correct dumb typos. And in true *Jerry Maguire* fashion, we'd regularly complete each other, paying off setups the other guy only semiconsciously created.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Janice Nolan:

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