





## Between the Panels

Obviously, the main action in comics is portrayed within panels. But gutters play a crucial role by connecting sequential panels into a coherent story. Whether two seconds or two years elapse between consecutive panels, the gutter is where that unseen action occurs.

Through the phenomenon Scott McCloud calls “closure” (*Understanding Comics*, Chapter 3), readers imagine some of what happens in the gutters — thus they experience sequential art as a unified narrative rather than a series of isolated, disconnected panels. Abrupt or unclear shifts between panels can confuse readers and distance them from a story, so most comic book creators strive to create smooth transitions. Believe it or not, reading comics is something of a learned skill. People who rarely read comic strips or comic books may have a hard time perceiving sequential art as anything more than a series of disconnected images. Or they may simply ignore the images in favor of the words if the layout is confusing.

There are five basic categories of panel-to-panel transitions (see attachments):

**Moment to moment:** Consecutive panels portraying the *same subject* (e.g., a person or thing) during a sequence of *different moments*, with little time elapsing between panels.

**Action to action:** Panels showing the *same subject* in a sequence of *different yet connected actions*, with more time between panels than in moment-to-moment transitions.

**Subject to subject:** Panels depicting *different subjects* within the *same scene*, such as two people conversing and elements of their surroundings.

**Scene to scene:** As you might guess, panels that show completely *different scenes*. In such transitions, the gutter usually represents a substantial distance across time, space, or both. Captions, dialogue, and panel composition are good tools for bridging scene changes between panels.

**Aspect to aspect:** Panels depicting *different elements* of a place, mood, or concept. Evoking feelings or thoughts takes primacy, while time and space between panels tend to be highly variable. This type of transition is unusual in genre stories in the U.S. but more common in manga.

## Temporal Mechanics

One means by which both movies and comic books make fiction more dramatic than real life is the manipulation of time. They show certain significant moments within their stories, while omitting others. Comics, unlike cinema, do so through still images, absorbed by different readers at their own speeds. Reading comics is a more interactive process than watching films, relying partly on the reader’s actions and partly on the writer’s and artist’s control of pacing.

Because of this interactivity, there are two interrelated types of pacing in comics: The pace at which time seems to move *within* the story, and the pace at which your audience *reads* the story. Factors that influence the reader’s pace include panel size and shape, dialogue and caption length, page layout and pagination, the type of scene being depicted, and the level of visual detail within each panel. Wordy panels almost always slow down the reader, for example.

However, because these elements all work in combination, any one technique can have different effects depending on context. For example, a large, silent panel in a contemplative scene may slow the reader. But a large, sparsely worded panel in an action scene may quicken the reader’s pace. This is another aspect of visual storytelling that deserves close attention when you’re reading comics critically.

Your primary tool for controlling the pace of time within the story is panel arrangement. You can heighten the impact of certain moments either by telescoping them into a sequence that seems slower than realtime, or by compressing them into a quicker sequence with more time elapsing between panels. There are five main ways of slowing down time during a conversation (see attachments):

1. Insert a “pause” panel.
2. Lengthen the pause by devoting several panels to it.
3. Lengthen the pause by widening the gutters between panels.
4. Lengthen the pause by widening the panel.
5. Lengthen the pause by removing borders, suspending the panel in time and space.

