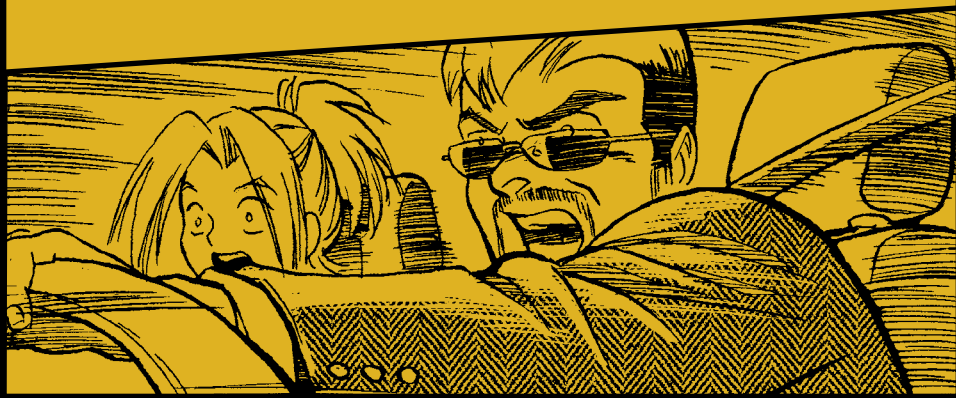# HOW TO DRAW COMICS

A BRIEF GUIDE BY DIRK I. TIEDE

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:

The process I go through to create each new page has evolved considerably since I began drawing *Paradigm Shift* nearly twenty years ago. When I started, I was using a loose script, 10"x15" bristol, improvised pencils, Micron pen inks, and an old Mac clone. By the time I finished my latest book in late 2018, I was using a full graphic novel manuscript and working almost entirely digitally.

I've revamped this tutorial to reflect the general process of how I create a comic. While my tools and process have continued to evolve and become more refined since I published my first book in 2003, the thought process remains largely the same.

Just as my tools have changed since I first wrote this, this certainly is not the only way to craft a comic page. Every artist finds what works best. My hope is this provides an insightful glimpse into the way I work and helps you to find your way as you create your own comics.

Keep drawing and good luck!

Dirk I. Tiede

Spring 2019

HOW TO DRAW COMICS: A BRIEF GUIDE

Download Edition, May 2019

You can find *Paradigm Shift Books 1-4* at *www.paradigmshiftmanga.com*

For more tips, tricks, tutorials on drawing and creating comics, go to *www.dirktiede.com*.

HOW TO DRAW COMICS

A BRIEF GUIDE BY DIRK I.TIEDE

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

.05 Mechanical Pencil

White Vinyl Erasers

Sakura MICRONs

Pencils - 2H - HB

Large Nib Holder & various nibs

Hunt 108 Flexible Crow Quill nib & holder

TRADITIONAL TOOLS

Paper:

Following in the footsteps of classic comic book artists, I use bristol board cut to 11"x17". I Strathmore 300 series vellum and 500 series plate surface bristol.

Pencils & Erasers:

• 5mm generic mechanical pencil • H, HB, 2B wood pencils

• Pentel "Clic" eraser

• Staedtler Mars plastic eraser

For pencilling, I use H, HB, and 2B wood pencils during the layout phases, but usually finish the drawing using a generic .5mm mechanical pencil.

I use Pentel "Clic" erasers for general erasing, and a big Mars block eraser for large areas plus clean-up when I've finished inking. I get the best results from soft white plastic erasers like these.

Ink Pens:

• *Higgins Waterproof Black India Ink*

• *Small & Large Hunt Nib holders*

• *Hunt 108 Flexible point nibs*

• *Hunt 56 School Round point nibs*

• *Hunt 101 Imperial point nib*

• *Sakura Pigma MICRON disposable technical pens*

When I first started drawing PS, I inked exclusively with Sakura Pigma MICRON technical pens because they were cheap and mess-free. As time progressed, I took the plunge and started playing with old-style dipped nib pens, eventually settling on the Hunt 108 Flexible nib. Also, for things like "starburst" effects the Hunt 56 School Round Point nib works great, as does the Hunt 101 Imperial point nib.

DIGITAL TOOLS

The biggest change between the tools I used for the first three books of *Paradigm Shift* is I've gone mostly digital.

Now my tools of choice for drawing comics digitally are *CLIP Studio Paint* and a *Wacom Cintiq 22HD*.

Here's a rundown of my current digital tools:

- *Late 2013 Retina 15-in MacBook Pro (16GB RAM, 512GB HD, 2.3 GHz Intel Core i7)*
- *Wacom Cintiq 22HD*
- *iPad Pro 12.9" w| Apple Pencil and AstroPad (which turns it into a Cintiq clone for mobile use)*
- *Epson Photo 1400 large-format printer*
- *Adobe Creative Suite: Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign*
- *CLIP Studio Paint*
- *Trimble SketchUp Pro (for 3D modeling)*

The upside to all these wonderful digital tools is that they are fast, flexible and allow me zoom in on my work and use my whole arm to draw, which is good for me ergonomically. They are incredibly powerful and pretty much allow me to get even closer to my intended visual ideas than I ever could before.

The downside is obvious—they're expensive! Keeping up with the pace of technology is difficult. If you're just starting out, don't worry about forking over thousands of dollars to get a full "professional"

setup. Inexpensive tablets provide some decent apps. *CLIP Studio Paint* also runs on the iPad, and if you already have a Mac, *AstroPad* will turn your iPad and Apple pencil into a mini-Cintiq.

The other major problem is there will never be a physical art object of the digital work I've done, only printed facsimiles. The art itself exists only as a file on a hard drive. Also, I have found that working exclusively digitally does dull my skills with my traditional tools over time, so it's good for me to take a break and do a real painting, portrait or ink drawing now and then to keep my practice up. Lastly, all this digital flexibility can lead to some indecision. If I can change something infinitely, it introduces the subtle temptation for perfection, which will inevitably disappoint.

In the final analysis, there's no "right" tool to draw your comics. Find what works for you and go with it.

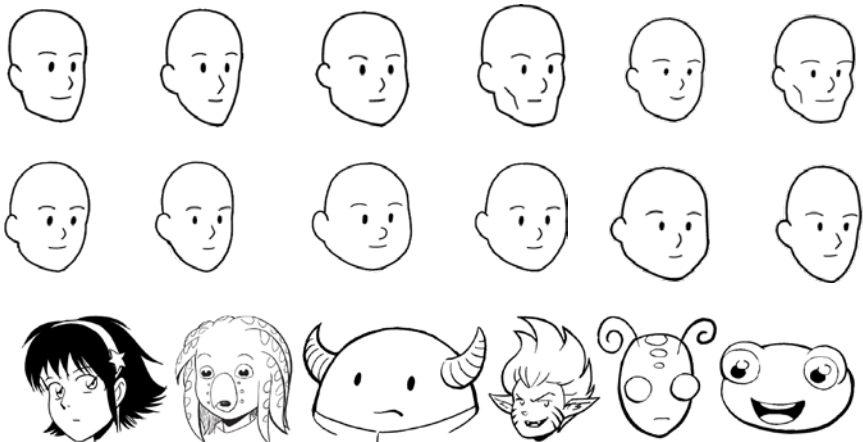# CHARACTERS - CREATION & DESIGN

SHAPES & SILHOUETTES

Basic body types create different silhouettes. The more you change the silhouette, the more you get a recognizable character
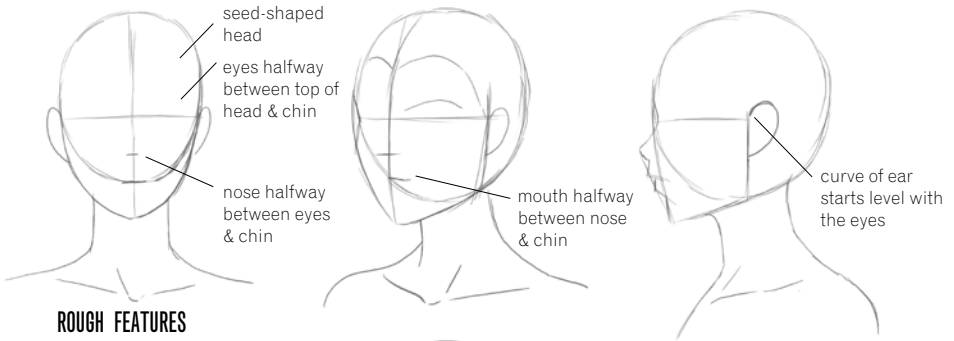

Head shapes also have different personalities:
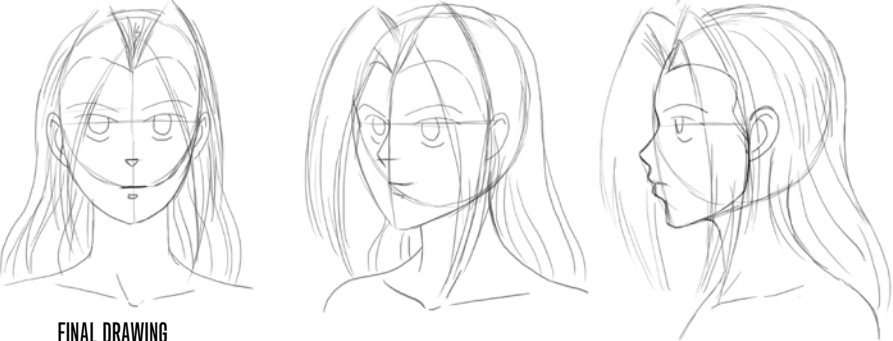
DRAWING THE HEAD - ANIME/MANGA STYLE
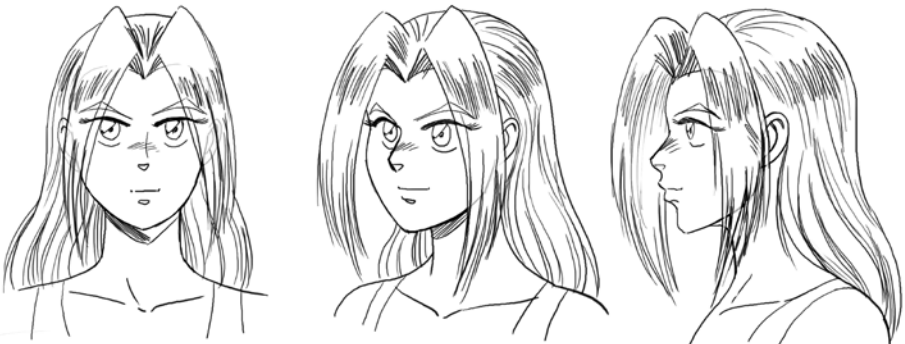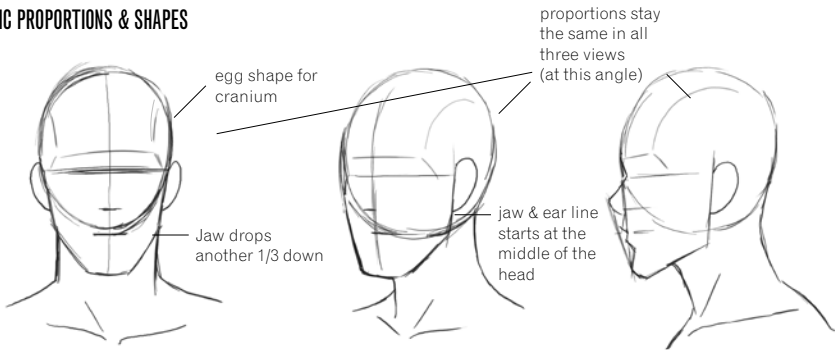
BASIC PROPORTIONS & SHAPES

seed-shaped head

eyes halfway between top of head & chin

nose halfway between eyes & chin

mouth halfway between nose & chin

curve of ear starts level with the eyes

ROUGH FEATURES

mouth in line between nose and chin

bottom of ear in line with tip of the nose

ADD DETAILS

FINAL DRAWING

5

DRAWING THE HEAD - AMERICAN COMICS STYLE

BASIC PROPORTIONS & SHAPES

egg shape for cranium

proportions stay the same in all three views (at this angle)

Jaw drops another 1/3 down

jaw & ear line starts at the middle of the head
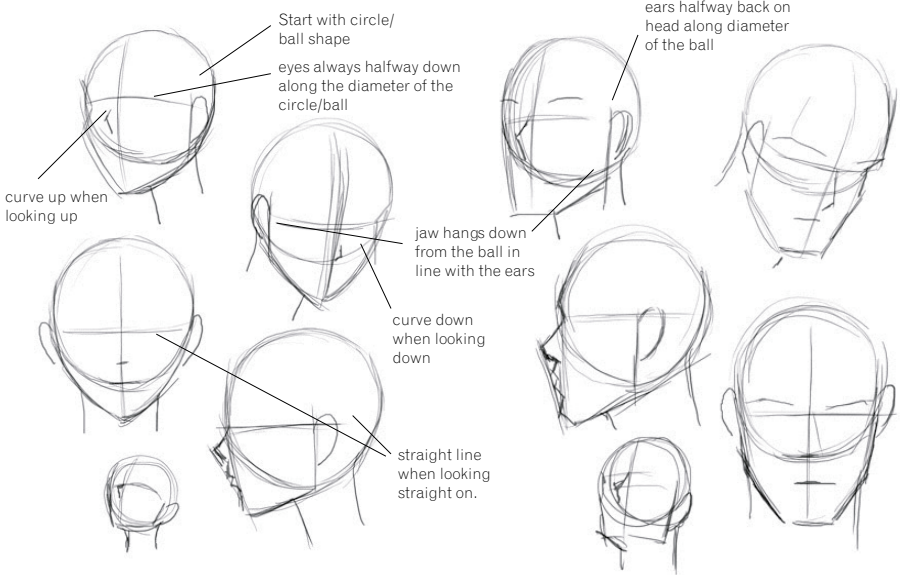
ROUGH FEATURES

eyes about one eye length apart

ADD DETAILS

FINAL DRAWING

DRAWING THE HEAD FROM ANY ANGLE

Start with circle/ball shape

eyes always halfway down along the diameter of the circle/ball

ears halfway back on head along diameter of the ball

curve up when looking up

jaw hangs down from the ball in line with the ears

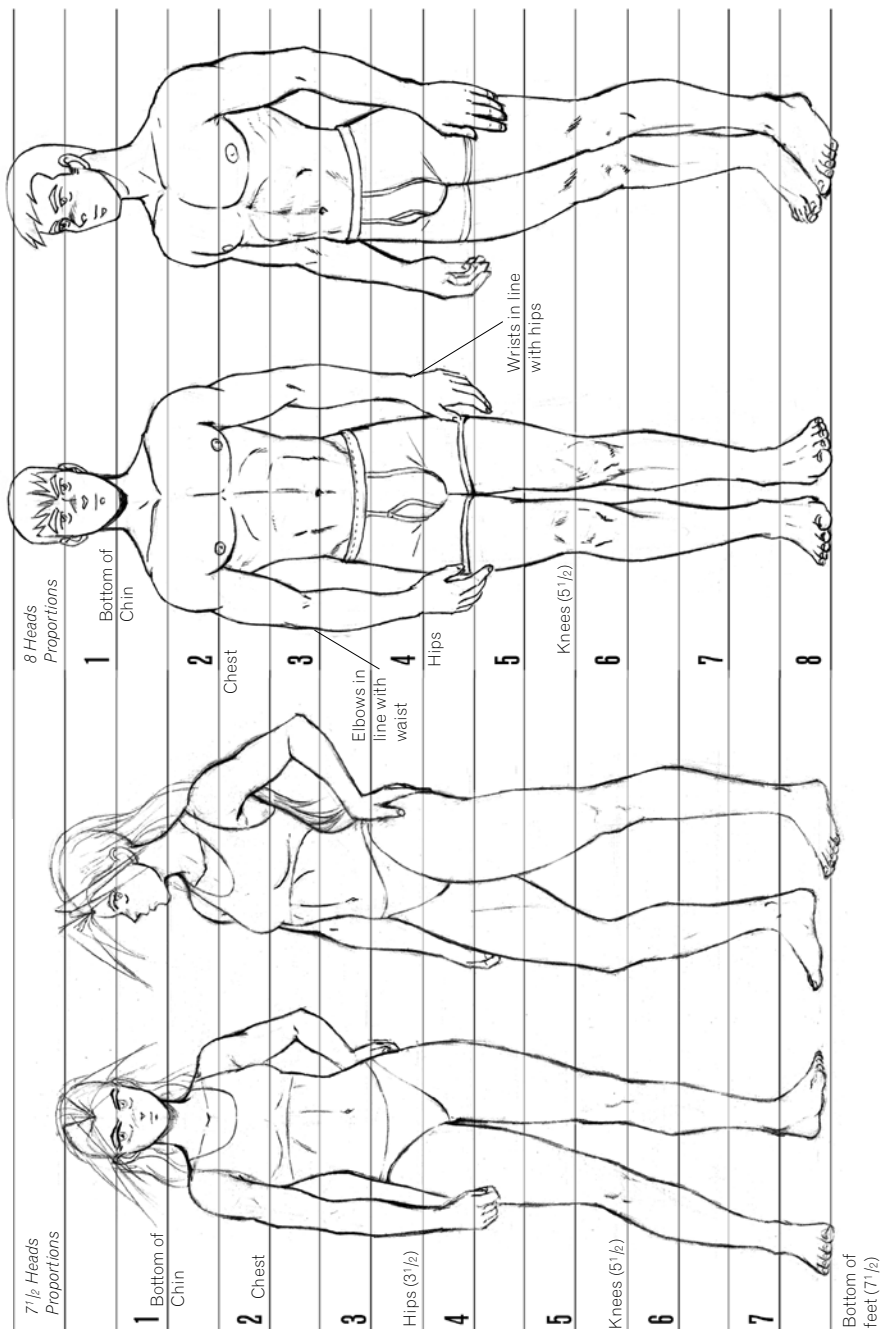curve down when looking down
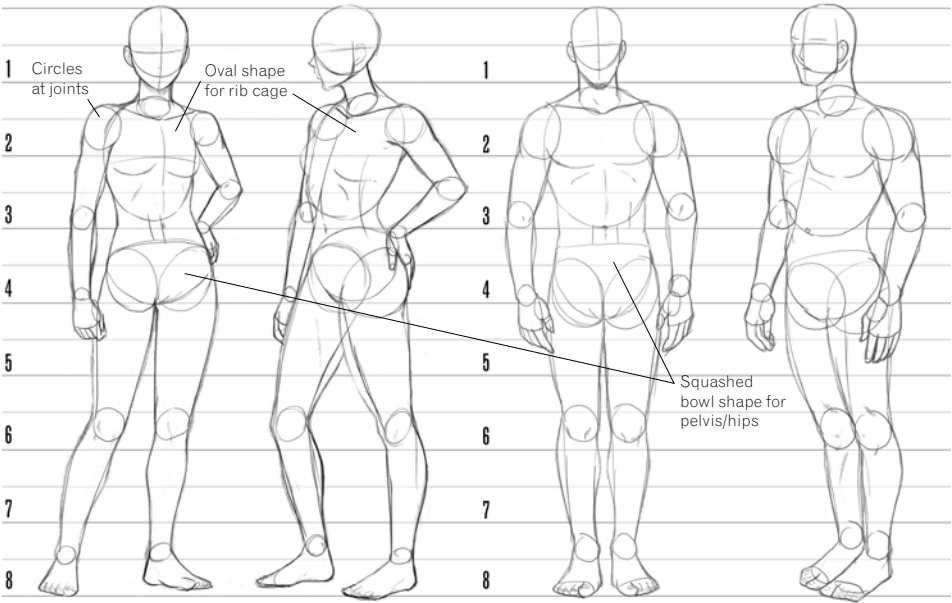
straight line when looking straight on.

EXAMPLES:
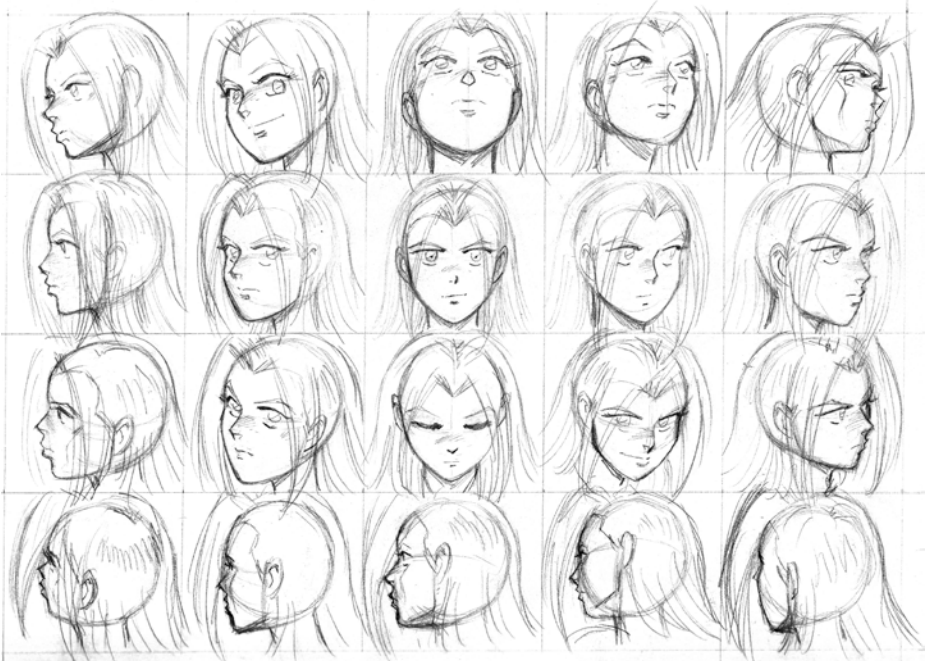
Note the "seed" shape fits no matter what direction she looks.

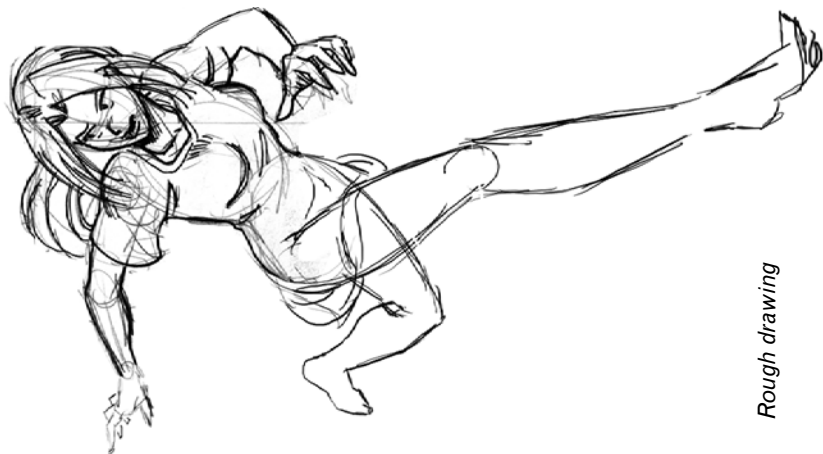# CHARACTERS - THE FIGURE

BASIC PROPORTIONS — MEASURED IN "HEADS"

7½ Heads Proportions

1 Bottom of Chin

2 Chest

3 Hips (3½)

4

5

6 Knees (5½)

7

Bottom of feet (7½)

8 Heads Proportions

1 Bottom of Chin

2 Chest

3

Elbows in line with waist

4 Hips

5

6 Knees (5½)

7

8

Wrists in line with hips

THE FIGURE - BASIC SHAPES

Circles at joints

Oval shape for rib cage

Squashed bowl shape for pelvis/hips

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8

FORMS & DETAILS

1
2
3
4
5
6
7

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8

(check out a figure drawing or anatomy book for more details on muscles)
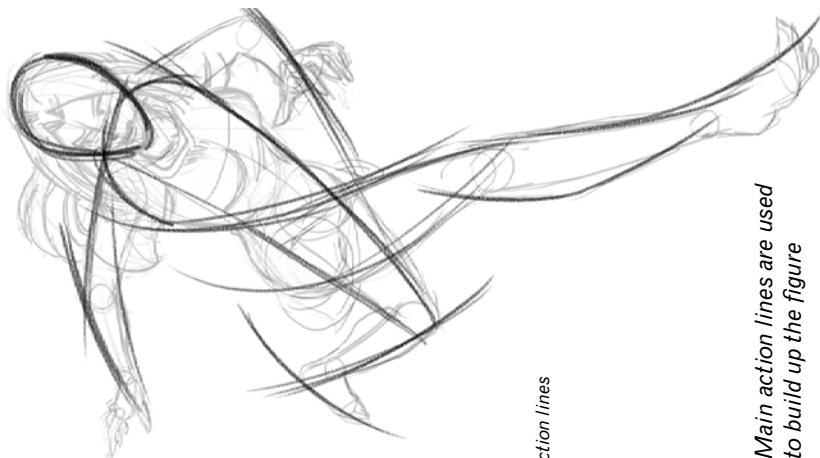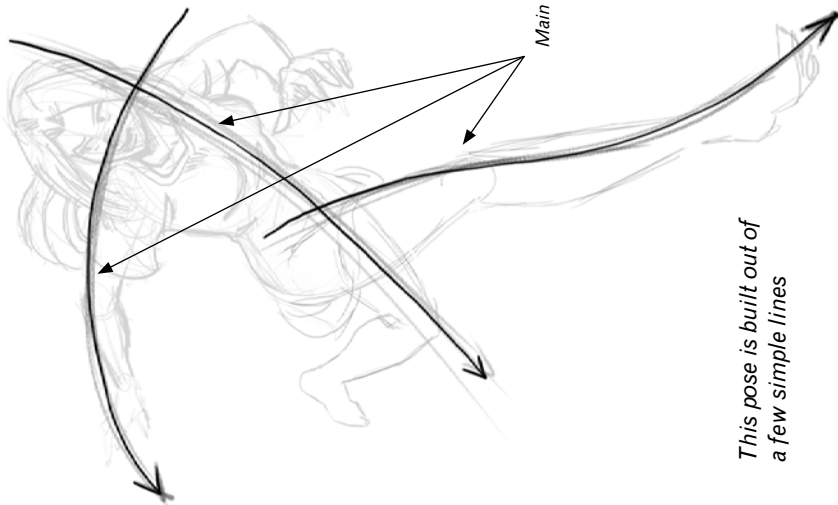
9
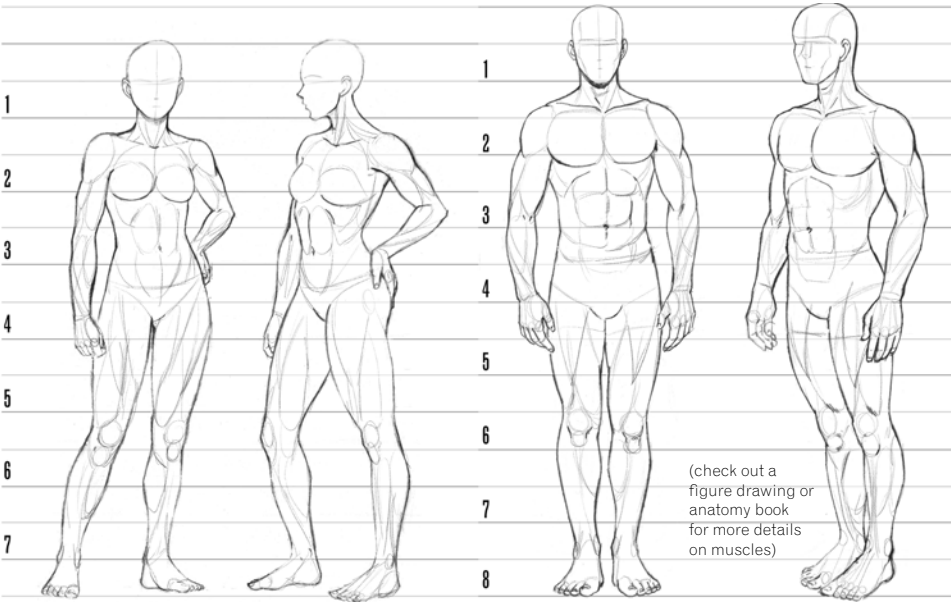
DRAWING THE FIGURE IN MOTION
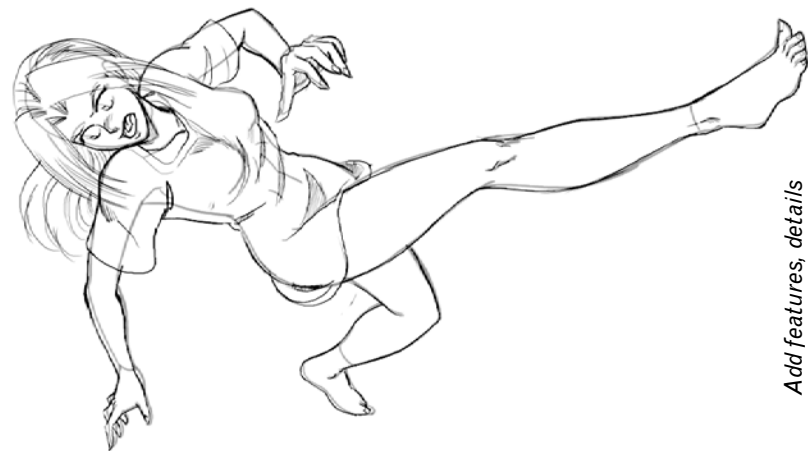

Rough drawing

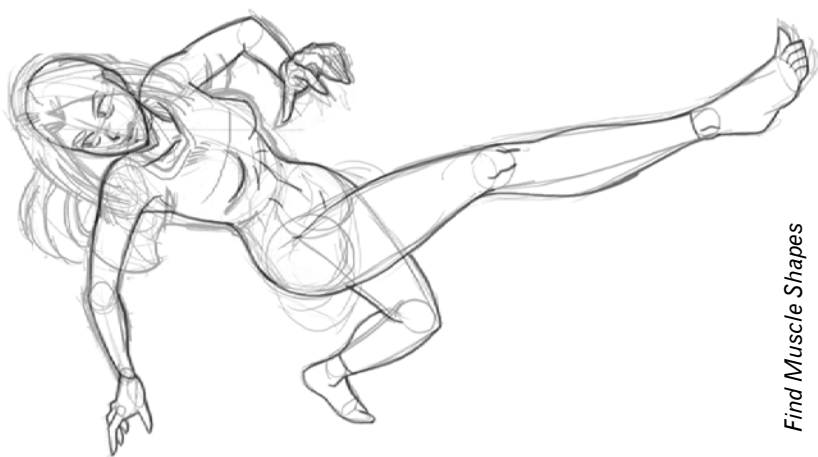*Main action lines are used to build up the figure*

Main action lines

This pose is built out of a few simple lines
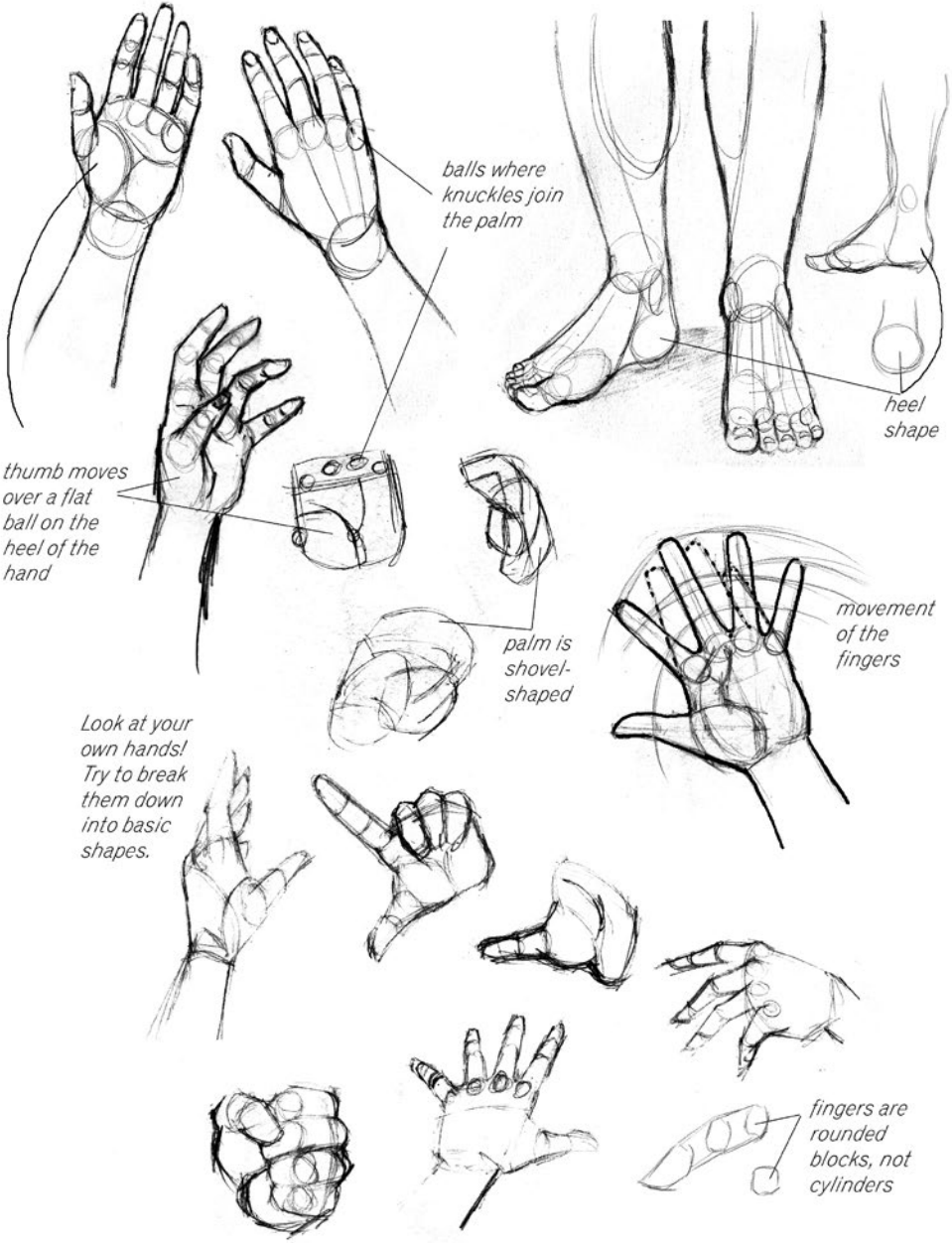
10

Add features, details and refine the drawing.

Find Muscle Shapes

Basic Shapes under rough drawing

11

balls where
knuckles join
the palm

thumb moves
over a flat
ball on the
heel of the
hand

heel
shape

palm is
shovel-
shaped

movement
of the
fingers

Look at your
own hands!
Try to break
them down
into basic
shapes.

fingers are
rounded
blocks, not
cylinders

THE STORY

As an artist, I think of my stories visually—in fact they almost "beam" into my head like a movie in my mind's eye. Becuase of this, I deliberately chose to write *PS* in a cinematic style. I don't use narration, preferring to use visuals and character dialogue to move the story along. The only exception is the "timestamp" I put at the beginning of each scene to denote when and where the scene takes place. While I also try to make the dialogue as interesting and readable as I can, it's second place to the visuals. One of my rules of thumb is, "if you can't tell what's going on in a page before reading the dialogue, there is something wrong".

My general process is to write out the basic story line ahead of time in the form of an outline. For *PS*, it started out as a plot synopsis that laid out what would become books 1-3 before going back to write the script.

Even then, it wasn't until after the first couple of scenes that I actually decided to write panel-by-panel script. These days I just skip putting in the panel numbers entirely and treat it more or less like a movie script—except it's broken into discreet pages. Although I still aim for six things happening on a page on average.

While this is one way of writing a comic, there are many other ways, too. If you want some expert advice on writing for comics, I recommend you read *"Writers on Comics Scriptwriting"* by Mark Salisbury. It has interviews with Peter David, Neil Gaiman, Frank Miller, Todd McFarlane, Warren Ellis and several others. It also provides sample pages from their scripts.

"Understanding Comics" by Scott McCloud is a must-read. An excellent treatise on "what is comics?" it covers the essential interplay of words and pictures that make up we call "comics." Be sure to also read his excellent *"Making Comics"* which goes into for more detail on the process of creating comics than I could squeeze into these few pages.

I try to keep the following in mind while I write my scripts:

1. *A page means a page.* — I've found that one page of double-spaced script is roughly equivalent to one page of comic. I don't worry about going under, but once past the first page of script, I consider starting a new page. Otherwise it gets difficult to squeeze everything in without becoming cluttered.

2. *Give the page room to breathe.* This is corollary to #1. Don't try to be economical and squeeze everything into every single page. Sometimes I to try to do too much in a page, and it ends up being a nightmare to draw.

3. *How many panels?* — I try to keep the average panel count per page under seven. Six is optimal, but some scenes may require more. I often end up with seven. It's possible to squeeze up to twice that on a page, but don't expect to have a lot of detail or dialogue on it. It's all about striking a balance.†

4. *HAVE FUN!* — Nothing kills creativity like over thinking a problem. Just go with the flow and have fun. The more fun I have writing the story, the more fun a reader will have when they read it.

THE SCRIPT

Here's the script for the example page below. It's from *PS Book #4*.

```
PAGE 143:

DREAM: Black BG/gutters cue.

Zoom in Kate in the hospital bed.

Her eyes open

Suddenly the female test subject next to her begins writhing, back
arching away from the bed like a seizure

Kate sits up, watching horrified

        KATE: Help!

The patient begin to transform, teeth becoming fangs, fur sprouting,
face contorting in agony.

        KATE: SOMEBODY!  HELP!

The other test subjects are out cold

        KATE: PLEASE!

The doctor from the UNDISCLOSED LOCATION scene, followed by nurses
and orderlies pour into room.
```

LAYOUTS

First, I start playing with laying out the panels on the page. Sometimes I'll do this by drawing little thumbnails in the margins of the script. I try to imagine how each image of the story would look in these shapes, and try to keep the layouts of the last few pages in mind so the new page won't look redundant and maintains the flow and pace of the story.

Once I've decided on a good layout, I also draw in little curves going through each panel to show how the eye will move throughout the page. I've added arrows to this diagram to illustrate what I mean.
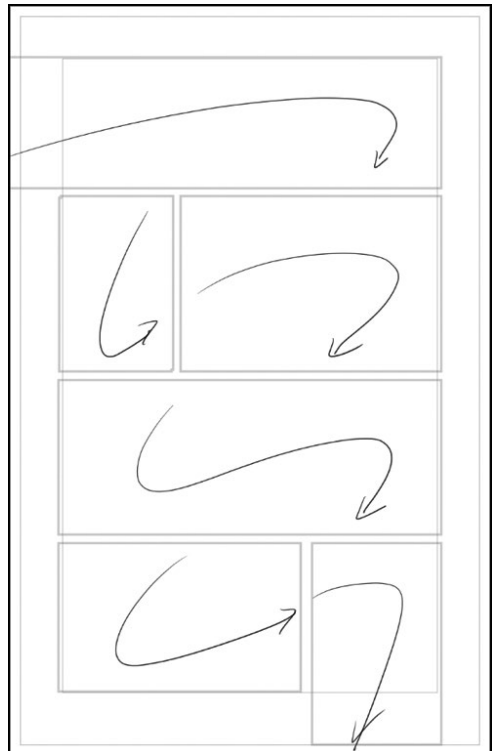
THUMBNAILS

Proceeding to thumbnails, I flesh out the interior of the panels to see how the scene might be composed on the final page. I keep them loose just to get an idea where things will go.

I use the arrows to help me place elements within each panel like heads, dialogue balloons or even background elements. I find lining up things in perspective with them works particularly well.

Doing this helps me quickly get something down on the page, and I find it helps guide a reader's eye through the page, too.

I do a quick rough version, then go back over it to outline all the big shapes and fill in the dark areas. If the page reads well on a small scale like this, then chances are it will also work well as a full-sized page.

Other than the writing itself, I consider this stage to be the most important part of making a comic. In fact, this is really the heart of comics—figuring out what image to put next to another in a sequence to tell your story. It doesn't matter if you draw stick figures or hyper-realistic painted graphic novels. If you can tell a story in thumbnail form, you'll make a great comic, regardless of your style.

Also a note on lettering. I tend to work out all the dialogue between the thumbnail and rough pencil stage. I recommend you do, too.
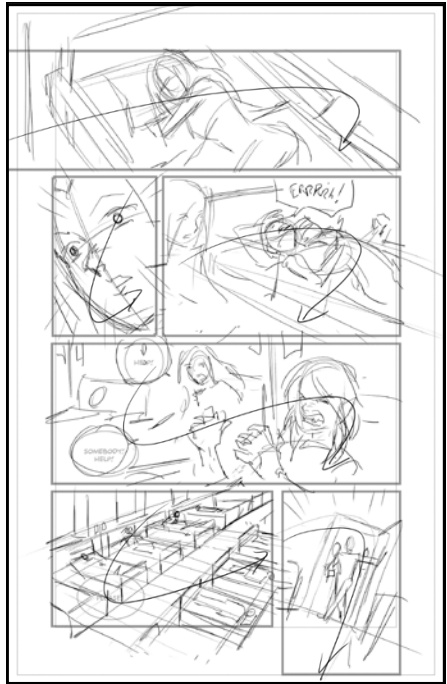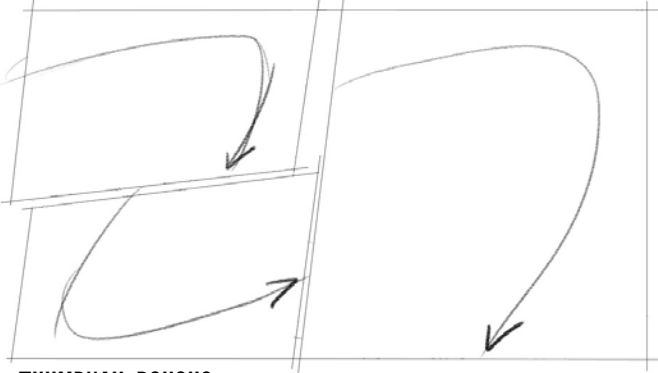

Rough thumbnails. Note arrows.
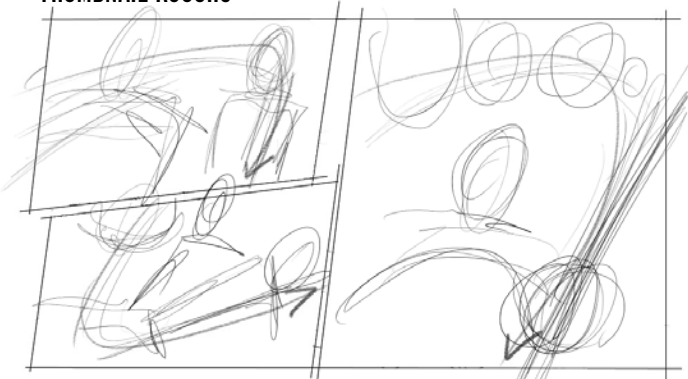

Finished thumbnails.

15

ANATOMY OF A PANEL LAYOUT

Before we move on to fleshing the example page, I'd like to give another example of the layout and thumbnailing process. Here's how it works in a scene from *Paradigm Shift Book 1 (page 31)*.
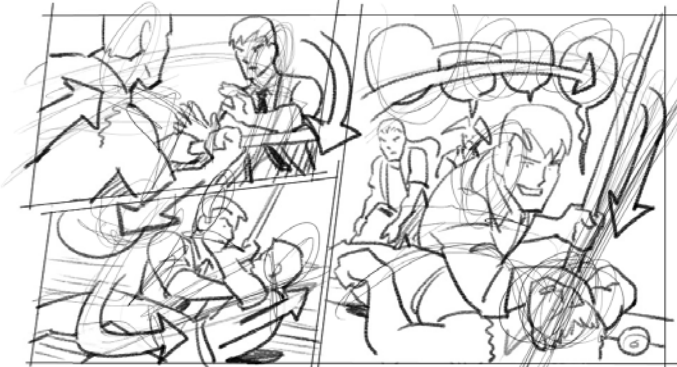
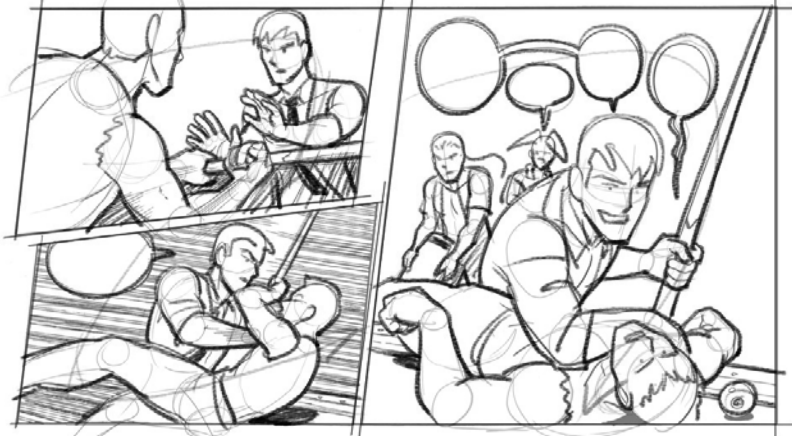### LAYOUT WITH "FLOW" ARROWS

THUMBNAIL ROUGHS

USING ARROWS TO HELP "FLOW" THROUGH PANELS

Note how the action "flows" through the artwork from panel to pane along the route of the arrows. This isn't an accident!

## USE THUMBNAILS FOR ROUGH PENCILS

PENCILS

FINAL INKS

ROUGH PENCILS

Now that I'm happy with my thumbnails, I can start fleshing out the artwork.
Note how I build up the characters using rough anatomical forms. For this
page, I drew directly over my thumbnails because I was working digitally.
In years past, I would just look at the thumbnail in my sketchbook or even
on a printed page of script and draw a bigger version. You can also scan in
your thumbnails and print them up full size in a light blue so they're easy
to draw over. I did this for the pencils in *STRANGER.*
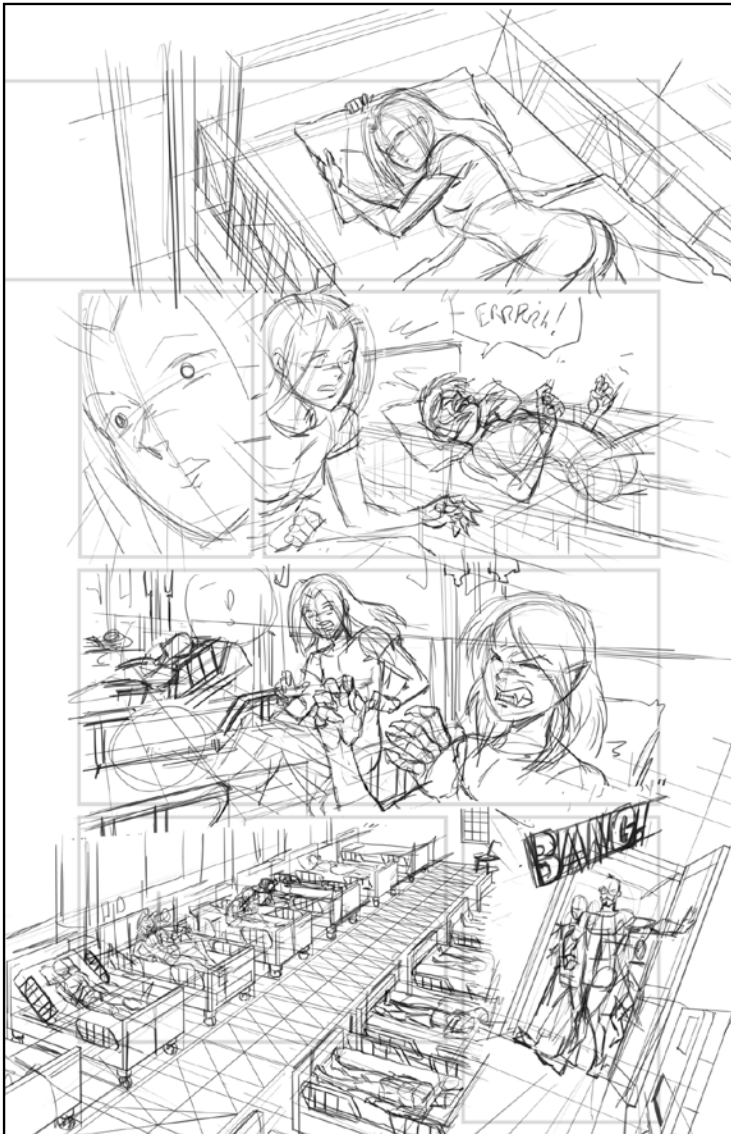
FINISHED PENCILS

At this point, the rest is really just illustration. As I said, the thumbnailing part is really the core part of making comics. That said, let's talk about some of the detail work. If you compare to the roughs on the left, you can see how I built up the characters and drew the final over the top. This is easy to do on a new layer if you're working digitaly, but you can do this in the analog world by using a lightbox and drawing onto a new sheet of paper or bristol. I used to do this all the time.

PENCILS - BACKGROUNDS

Now, let's talk about that panel in the bottom left corner. It uses extensive use of perspective techniques. Here's how I broke it down. I should note used *CLIP Studio's* perspective rulers to help me with this particular drawing, but I would use similar techniques if I were to draw it on paper. It just would require a fair amout of ruler work.

It all starts with the thumbnail, which was drawn freehand. However, I follow a few basic rules:

1. All parallel lines will converge at a point on the horizon

2. The horizon is always at eye (or camera) level. In this case, since we're looking down, that means the horizon is *above* the panel somewhere.

3. Line up the beds in a rough grid pattern.
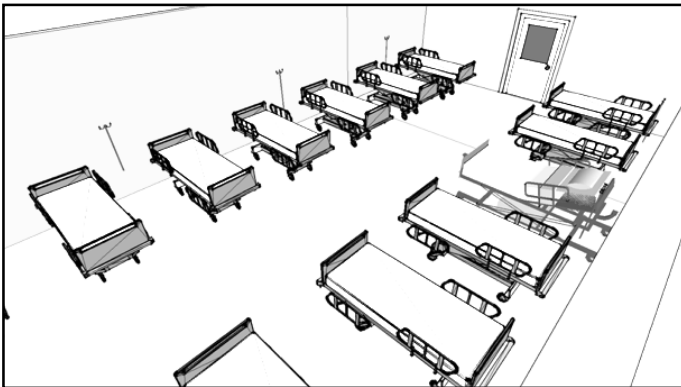
I also worked from reference photos I found through Google Image Search (sorry I can't print those, they're copyrighted), and even made a rough model of the room in SketchUp using free downloadable 3D models (above).

PENCILS - WORKING WITH PERSPECTIVE

STEP ONE: FIND VANISHING POINTS AND HORIZON

Using the rough drawing find the vanishing points going in each direction and connect them with a horizon line.
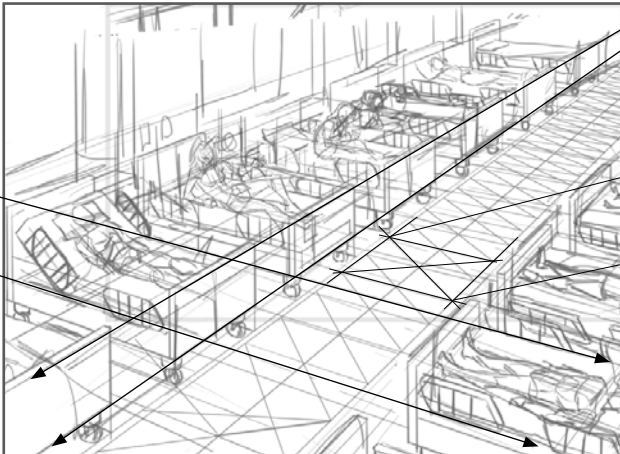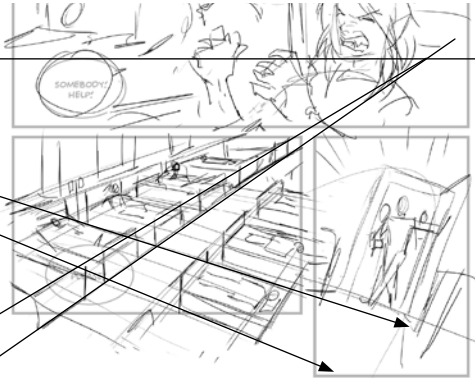
Vanishing Point #1

Horizon Line

Vanishing Point #2 (extends far off the side of the page)

STEP TWO: GUIDE LINES

Use vanishing points to lay out all lines going in each direction. Except the vertical axis, which all go straight up. However, they would have vanishing point if this was three-point perspective.
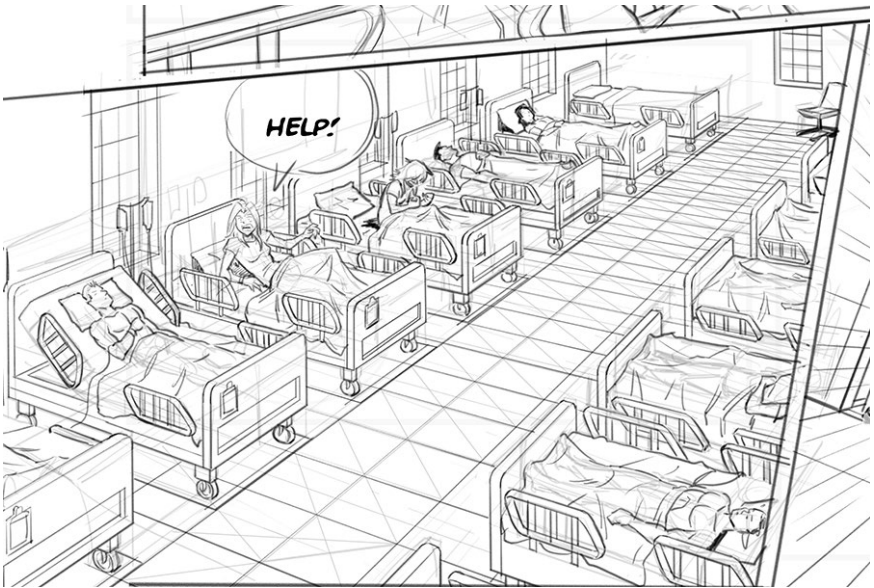
Tip: You can find the center of any square or rectangle by drawing an 'X' inside it.

This is how I layed out the tiles on the floor so they look regular.

PENCILS - PERSPECTIVE

Here's the final pencils. You can see all the guide lines underneath. Use as many as you need to lay out the objects in the space. The regular repeating patten on the floor is a technique using the 'X' trick.

Using this method, you use each of the vanishing points to guide each line in the drawing. Every line going roughly from the upper left right corner down to the left would use *Vanishing Point #1* and every line going from the upper left hand to the lower right would use *Vanishing Point #2.* If you want to be precise, you will line up a ruler with each point before you draw your line. In this case, I let *CLIP Studio* do the work using its "perspective ruler" tool, which allows you to lay out your vanishing points in advance and automatically detects which axis you are drawing on. It's much faster than working on paper, but this is exactly the same method I used on bristol for *PS Books 1-3*. It just took a little longer.

Also, if you have a vanishing point going off the edge of the page like this, but you're working on paper, just tape another sheet temporarily to the back of your page to extend your workspace out. Draw in the horizon and find your vanishing point. Though, you may need a long ruler in some cases.
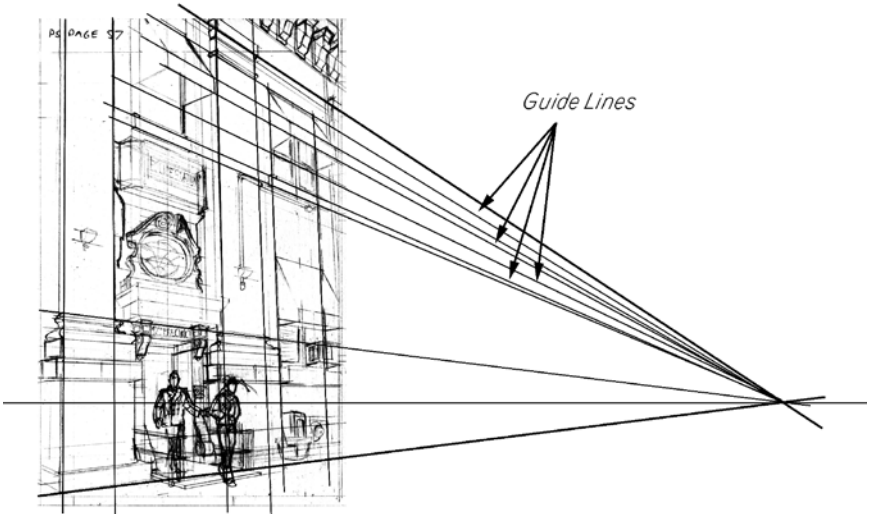
PENCILS - ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

Here's another example from the first book of *Paradigm Shift (page 60).* This one was done on bristol. To the right is the reference photo I used (which I took myself).

STEP ONE: *Lay out the big shapes while looking at the reference photo. Then find the main vanishing point.*
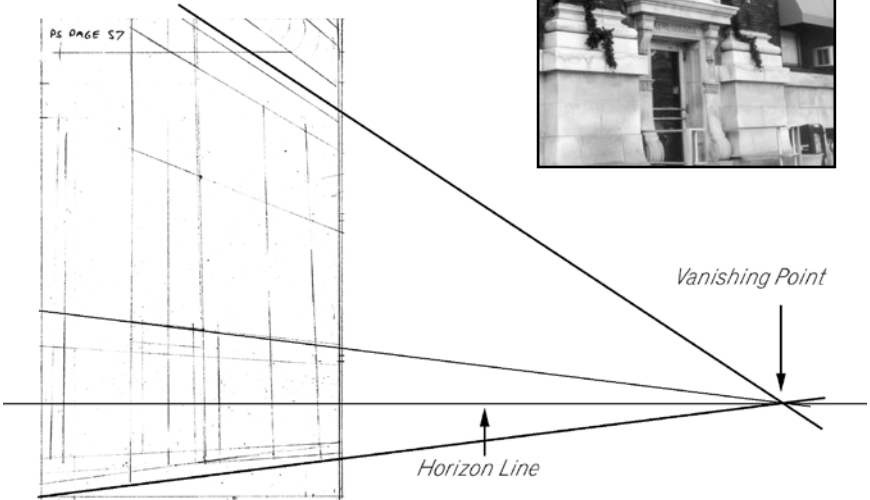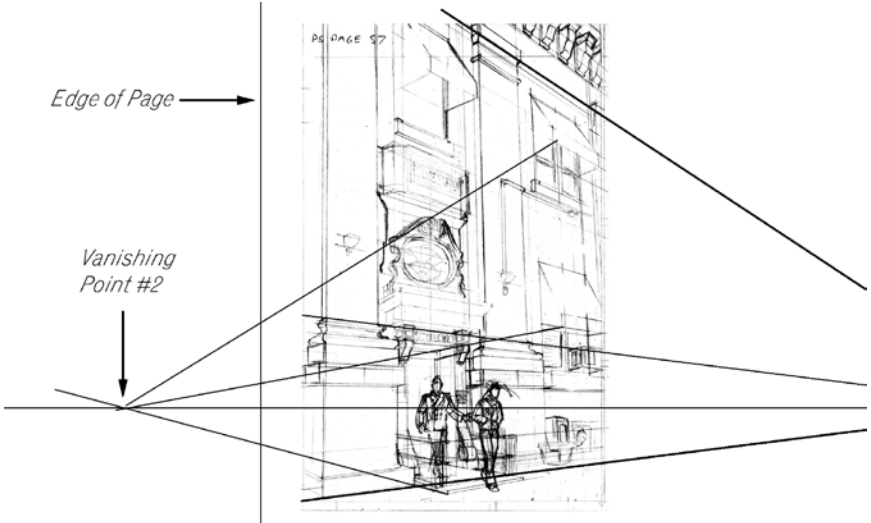

STEP TWO: *Use guide lines extended from the vanishing point to lay out the key details in the image*

PENCILS - ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

STEP THREE: *Find second vanishing point to create guides from the other direction.In this case, it extends off the page, so a second sheet of paper was taped to the back of the bristol to extend the work area.*

Edge of Page →

Vanishing
Point #2

STEP FOUR: *Continue to use reference photo and vanishing points as guides to finish the pencils.*

STEP FIVE: *Continue to use ref photo and vanishing points during the inking stage. Fill in detaills.*
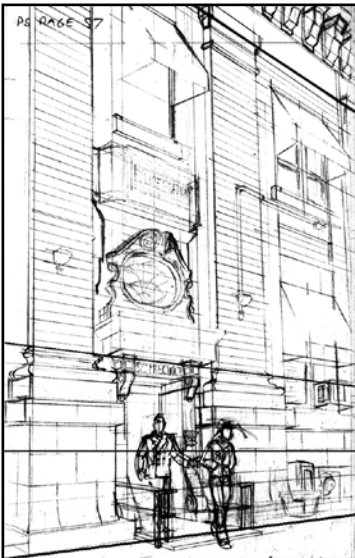
INKING - CHARACTERS

I make all the final decisions while inking. First, I ink the panel borders, then the dialogue balloons and any lettering and sound effects. On paper I use a MICRON or rapidograph. Digitally, any fixed-width pen tool will do. My lettering has always been digital, so I just put it in a layer folder above my artwork and turn it on off as needed to preview it.

Next, I move on to the characters. When working traditionally, I use a Hunt 108 dip pen which is pressure-sensitive and can create anything from very thin to very thick lines. I have set up a similar pen in *CLIP Studio* that mimics it pretty well when I work digitally.

Consider where the light source is in the drawing while inking. Make the lines facing the light source thinner than the lines on the shadow side. This helps give the inked drawing more depth.

INKING - BACKGROUNDS

Once the characters are complete, then it's time for backgrounds. Again, for any perspective shots, I pull out the rulers for all those straight lines, digital or otherwise.

With my reference material handy, I start by filling in the main lines and work my way in. One trick I use to deal with detailed pages like this is to start with the simple panels and work my way to the more detailed ones. That way it feels like I'm making quicker progress.

INKING - FINAL THOUGHTS

When tackling backgrounds, especially urban environments with a lot of straight lines, it's very important to have varied line weights. I tend to put thicker lines around the edges of objects and use finer lines for the interior details. I also don't use a ruler for every single line. I often pick an axis to do by hand. This gives an organic feel to the drawing, and keeps it from looking stiff.

A quick note about the "starburst" effects. They work just like vanishing points. Pick a point in the panel you wish to focus on and then use a ruler to have all your lines converge on that point. Vary your line weight, the length of the strokes, and do your best to taper the points that go towards the center and you can create beautiful, exciting effects.

Pro Tip: When you're working traditionally, take a break after you finish inking a page before you pull out the eraser to erase all those pencil lines. This goes double if you're working with with dip pens! If the ink isn't entirely dry, you can potentially smear ink across your beautiful new comic page. Don't let this happen to you! (Because it certainly has happened to me more times than I care to count.)

SCREENTONES
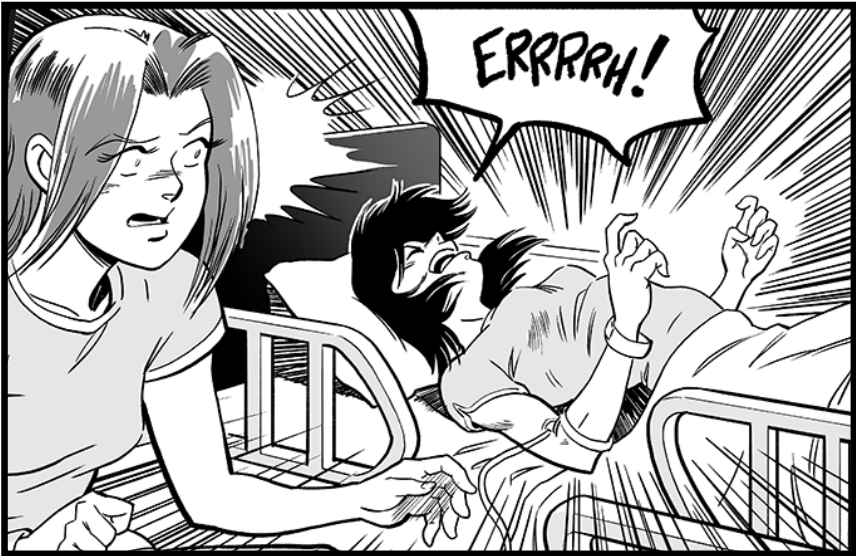
I do all my screentone and coloring work digitally. I developed this method in *Photoshop* and carried it over to *CLIP Studio*, which has the added benefit of previewing the actual screentone patterns in real time.

To start off, I create a new layer and change the blending to *Multiply*. Next, I pull out the **Fill** tool, make sure *All Layers* is checked, and start filling in the main areas on the characters, using consistent gray values across panels for hair, clothes, eyes and whatnot.

If the fill ever spills over, I *Undo*, go back and plug any holes with the *Pen* tool and re-fill the intended area. CLIP Studio can also automatically close gaps, which makes this process super fast.

I try to keep my screen tones simple. I tend to only work in 10%, 20%, 40%, 65% and 85% gray, plus black. I also will knock back tones with white on another layer to create "etching" effects without disturbing the original fills, like on Kate's hair, here.

I also try to keep the gradients simple, limiting them to one or two per panel at most unless it's particularly demanding lighting situation or complex panel that really will be served by them. Lighting and composition come even more into play. I always put gradients on their own layer.I start in with flat tones on the base later, then use the *Magic Wand* tool to create selections for the gradients.

The key to it is balance. If there are too many gradients, the piece will become muddy. Also, I try to make gradients cover a wide contrast range, like 40% to 100% or 0% to 40%. 0% to 10% also works.
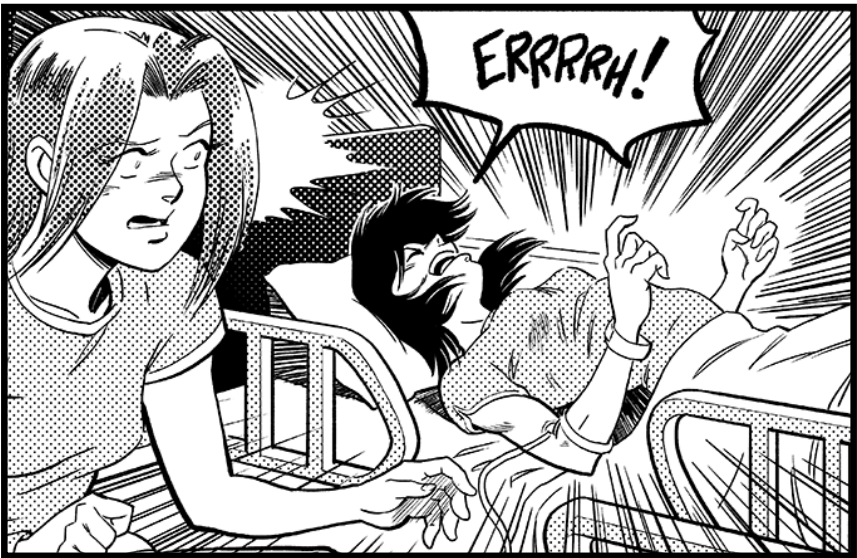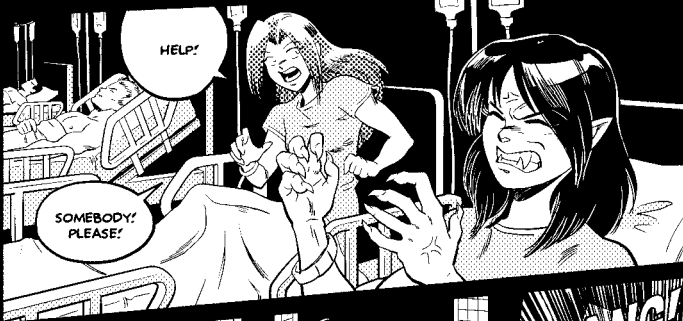
Here's the what the tones look like once they're rendered from the grayscale source. The linescreen here is set to 53 lines per inch (lpi) with round dots at a 45 degree angle.
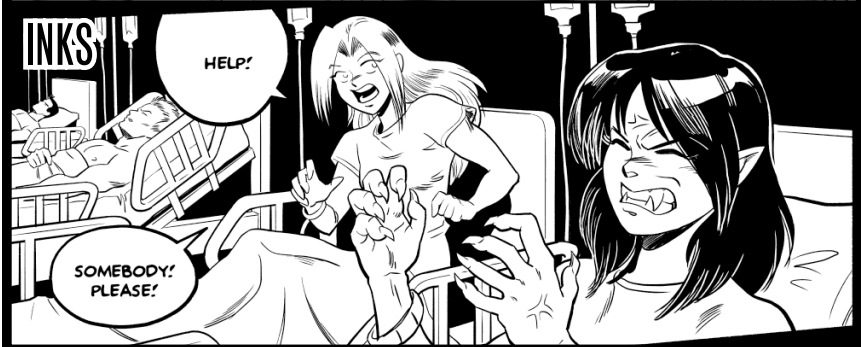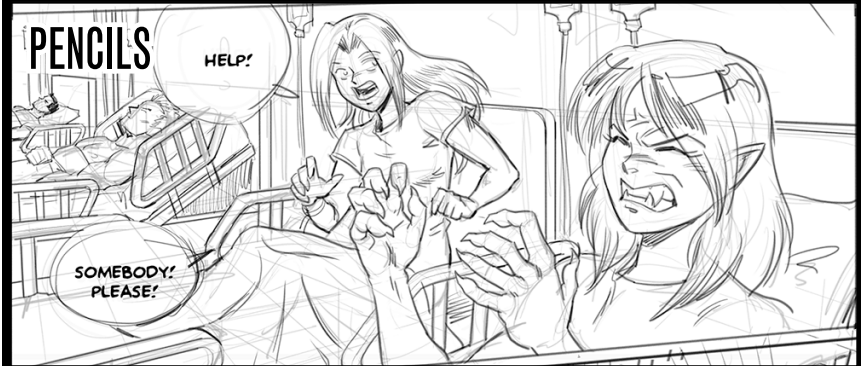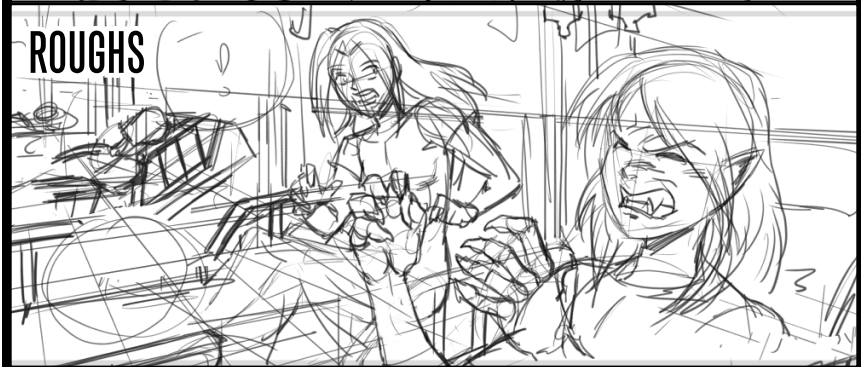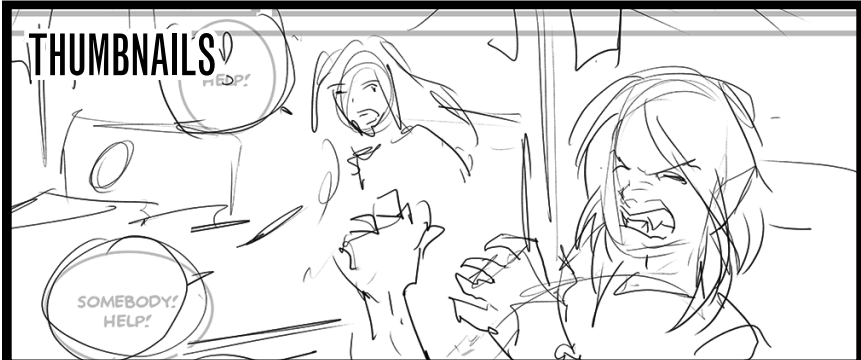
Working in grayscale like this makes this process quick and easy, especially when you can preview the results in CLIP Studio like we see here. However, Photoshop can generate screentones as well by converting an image from grayscale to a bitmap (1 bit black & white) by going to *Image>Mode>Bitmap...* and then following the dialog prompts. If you input the same values used above, you'll get an identical result. It just takes a few more steps.

A note on shading. For some effects, I will create another layer above the main tones and again set the blending to *Multiply*. Then choose a 10-40% gray (depending on the harshness of the shadows) and draw in the darkened areas on the characters and backgrounds. I may also add another gradient or two for effect. This allows for covering multiple ranges of value all at once. However, consider doubling up the value of your tones in shadows (ie. use 40% tone on top of 40% tone) to create a good level of contrast. I've found that when I was too ligh (such as 10% on top of 40%), the results didn't "pop" very well.

Paradigm Shift Book 4, page 143

THUMBNAILS

HELP!

SOMEBODY!
HELP!

ROUGHS

PENCILS

HELP!

SOMEBODY!
PLEASE!

INKS

HELP!

SOMEBODY!
PLEASE!

IN CLOSING...

I know that a little guide like this can't possibly convey everything that goes into making a comic. However, I hope that by getting a glimpse into this process will give you ideas about how to proceed in your own artwork.

If you are to take one thing away from here, it it's this: drawing the final artwork in a comic isn't about making it perfect the first time you draw it. It's about working in layers and refining your ideas and your drawings as you go.

First I start with my story as an outline...

Then I write a script...

From the script, I start thumbnailing the story...

Then I do roughs based on the thumbnails...

Next come pencils from the roughs...

Then inking (my favorite part!)...

Finally, comes the screentones (or even color) before the comic is finished.

Even then, when working on an entire graphic novel, there still is the process of assembling the book, finding a printer and publishing, but that's for another guide entirely.
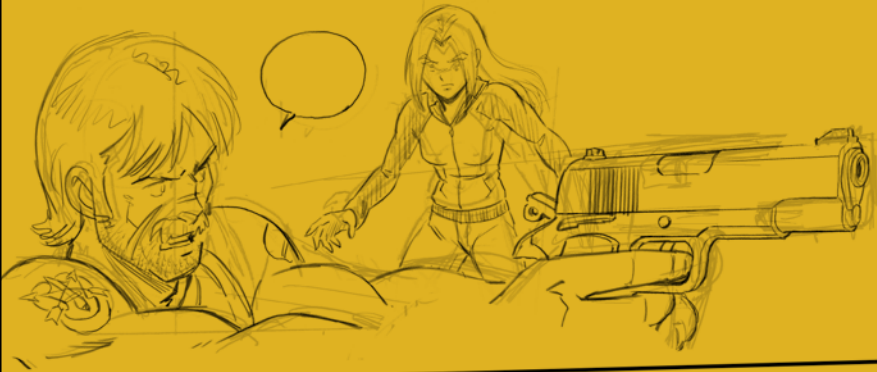
The point is there are at least seven stages between an initial idea and final artwork, and every time you go over that story or drawing, it has a chance to get better and get closer to the original idea you had in the first place (or even a better version of that idea.)

Give it a try for yourself and see what you can create.

Good luck and keep drawing!

--Dirk

FOR MORE, VISIT

WWW.DIRKTIEDE.COM