Club Ed Conversations

Editing Comic Books and Graphic Novels

Khelsea Purvis answered questions about editing comic books and graphic novels. The transcript has been edited for typos and clarity and to remove some of the “Hi, how are you?” conversation that happens in a live chat.

Here’s a blurb about Khelsea:

I help creative minds breathe life into their stories.

I specialize in manuscript critiques and developmental edits that help a story shine its brightest for readers to enjoy.

I bring a combination of editorial freelancing experience and traditional publishing knowledge to every project. As an editorial assistant at Simon & Schuster, I learned the ins and outs of the publishing process and discovered my potential for bringing stories to life. In addition to being listed as a Featured Editor in How to Self-Publish a Children’s Book by Yvonne Jones,

I’ve guided several self-published authors through the publishing process.

It brings me no greater joy than to cheer clients on as they share their stories with the world.

If you’re curious about a project that I’m part of, I recommend checking out *Secrets of the Stones* by Sabrina Kidd. You can find it on Amazon!

**Question** *(Jake Nicholls): I’d love to hear about the specific challenges and/or considerations when it comes to editing graphic novels. It’s a process I know very little about, so I’d love to learn how it differs from editing prose novels.*

**Answer**: It can depend on the type of editing that you’re doing. If you’re on the storyboarding or developmental side of things, it is similar to offering a critique on a story. You’ll look at the plot that you have and check to see if anything needs to be addressed. Are the characters boring? Is the plot too fast or too slow? What’s working and what’s not working? The same can be true when going from plot synopsis to script. You’ll want to make sure the script is following the synopsis while also addressing those kinds of developmental issues.

When dealing with the plot synopsis, it’s not really different from having a synopsis for prose. You’ll still address the same things. When the story moves to script form, you’ll just want to make sure there haven’t been any major changes from the synopsis. Copy editing functions about the same as it does with prose. Proofreading is more than just looking for typos. You’re looking for format or layout issues as well as any inconsistencies with the illustrations.

Now, if you’re just focusing on copy editing, it is similar to editing prose. Of course, you’ll have much less text to work with! Proofreading is a bit similar, but you’ll usually do proofreading after the text and illustrations have been joined together. Therefore, you’ll be working on a PDF.

While you are looking for minor errors that slipped by during copy editing, you’re also going to be looking for issues with the illustrations or layout of each page. Is something missing from the table on page 9 that the script mentioned being there? Are some of the illustrations bleeding off the page? Things like that.

I spend a lot of time doing the former work (storyboarding and addressing developmental concerns) than the latter work (copy editing and proofreading), but I still have experience with all of it. I essentially did all the editing stages I mentioned above for Secrets of the Stones.

**Question** *(Jennifer Lawler): To follow up, it sounds like there are several stages in editing graphic novels and comic books: the synopsis, which is where the story idea is developed (and where a dev editor might weigh in on the concept?), then the storyboarding, where the story is roughly laid out (and where more development can occur), then the story and illustrations are joined together and CE and PR take place.*

*Do you ever comment on the illustrations or is that someone else’s job?*

**Answer**: I comment on the illustrations when something seems inconsistent. For example, if CHARACTER A is frightened by CHARACTER B and decides to hide behind CHARACTER C for protection, we shouldn’t see CHARACTER A smirking at CHARACTER B while behind CHARACTER C. If I notice something like that, I will note that CHARACTER A should look scared rather than smug because the script most likely mentions (or infers) that it’s a scary moment for CHARACTER A.

I will also mention other things (like holding something in their right hand when they’re left-handed) if it is important to the character or plot. Usually, there is someone on the art team who addresses these things as well.

**Question** *(JL): I’m curious about the difference between a comic book and a graphic novel – it’s not just “one is longer than the other” right?*

**Answer**: Correct!

A comic book is for a serialized project. You could consider it similar to an episode of a TV series. The story unfolds over several issues. If the story is nonlinear, then each issue might tell its own self-contained story. The Invader Zim series by Jhonen Vasquez is a good example of a nonlinear series.

A graphic novel is a one-off story like a regular novel… unless it’s a graphic novel series… In that case, it is similar to how a regular book series works. Regardless, a graphic novel is similar to a movie rather than a TV show. The whole story tends to be told in that GN (unless it’s a series like I stated previously).

**Question** *(Jennifer Navarre): I’ve been researching graphic novels for kids over the last few months, and a lot of what I’m finding is about how the panels are set up in the final version. I know you need to write in more of a script format, but I’m wondering what are things you need to look for in a developmental edit for a GN.*

**Answer**: I would say you’re looking for the same types of issues. Character development, setting, plot progression, conflict, etc. You should have a plot synopsis to go off of to make sure the script is consistent in those areas.

**Question** *(Simone Salle): I’m primarily a games/TTRPG editor, but am excited to learn more about editing graphic novels. Do editors have much oversight on the art/layout in graphic novel editing, or is there an “art reviewer” separate from the artist/writer who would work alongside the editor?*

**Answer**: Yes, there is an art director (or artist) who works on the art/layout. However, as the editor, sometimes you will work alongside each other to address any concerns that come up.

**Question** *(JL): Are the people who write self-published graphic novels/comic books also usually the artists, too? Do you help writers unite with artists? And with art directors, how do self-publishers find them?*

**Answer**: It varies. In my experience, the writer and the illustrator are different people. The writer and illustrator have already been paired up by the time I get involved. If not, the writer has chosen the illustrator on their own. However, it is definitely possible for the writer and illustrator to be the same person. That is pretty common too. Art directors are more for traditional publishing than the indie market. That has been my experience at least! Self-publishers don’t tend to seek out art directors due to time and/or budget.

**Question** *(JL): That makes sense! So if working with self-publishing graphic novelists, you might be more vocal about any art problems? I’m thinking of the difference between how I flag art with a traditional publisher versus a self-publisher – I try not to second-guess the art director in trad publishing but I will be more . . . uh . . . forceful with self-publishers.*

**Answer**: Yes, you’d be more vocal about it because the individual wouldn’t have a whole team behind them like they would have in the traditional publishing space. Of course, just like with self-publishing authors of prose, there may be some push back that you have to deal with. However, in my experience, the individual appreciates all the eyes they can get on the project before they publish it.

**Question** *(Livia): If one already has DE training, but hasn’t read many or any graphic novels — what’s the minimum graphic novels one should read before trying to find some practice clients?*

*Also, are there graphic novels you’d recommend as essential to read?*

**Answer**: I wouldn’t say you should worry about the number of GNs you read. Instead, you should concern yourself with the types of GNs you read. Diversify the genres you read as much as you can. That will probably help you get comfortable a lot faster.

I don’t think there is any particular GN to read since it comes down to personal preference.

However, I think one way to get more comfortable with editing (or writing) comics or GNs is to take courses online or join an online community. Comics

Experience offers a lot of courses that you may find useful. I also recommend joining the Comic Book Editors Alliance group on Facebook. There is a lot of useful information there, and Steve (the person who runs the group) is an awesome guy who offers a wealth of information.

**Question** *(Jake Nicholls): Could you share a few of your personal favourite graphic novels, Khelsea? (In any genre.) I’m always looking for new things to read!*

**Answer**: If you haven’t already, you should definitely read *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang.

**Question** *(Jennifer Navarre): How do GN page/word counts compare to the average non-GN book in that genre/category? What is considered to be too long or too short?*

**Answer**: It depends. However, GNs tend to be longer at times because the story is being told panel by panel. There are things that exist in GNs (such as full-page spreads or pages without any text) that do not exist in regular novels. As a result, the page count may be higher, but the story moves faster.

Whether a GN is too long or too short depends on the genre and the target audience. For example, a GN that’s geared toward early readers may not exceed 64 pages. Some may be shorter and some may be longer, but they generally stay around that page count.

Khelsea, thanks so much for being here and answering our questions!