Assuming that you now have some idea of the actual possibilities open to you in telling a story, then the next stage we move into concerns the elements within the actual work of fiction itself. For the sake of convenience, the main elements in this category can be broken down into three major areas: characterization, depiction of environment, and finally plot. Let’s start with the environment first, because the nature of the plot and the motivations of the characters will be largely determined by the world in which they live.

The job of the writer, whether he or she is attempting to depict a colony on Neptune in the year 3020 or society life in London around 1890, is to conjure a sense of environmental reality as completely and as unobtrusively as possible. The most obvious way to do this is to explain the rudiments of your world to your readers by way of caption boxes or expository dialogue, but this is also to my mind the most unnatural method and in many ways the least effective. It just happens to be the easiest, which is why it’s used so often. Conversely, the best way to give your readers a sense of place and location in space and time is in my opinion the most difficult, while being the most rewarding in the long run.

If you look back to the early days of comics, when the writing was still pretty much in its infancy, you will come across many examples of a description of an environment by means of a brief caption or exposition. In the 30th century of the Legion of Super-Heroes, before Paul Levitz took over and began to put more effort into actually visualizing, along with Keith Giffen, the various worlds of the Legion’s universe, most of the worlds were summed up in a couple of sentences. Matter-Eater Lad’s planet of Bismoll was a world where all organic food was poisonous and so the inhabitants had learned how to eat...
have to be overcome before people could live on such a world and what sound like feasible methods by which the difficulties could be solved? Might the fact that Neptune is largely made of gas necessitate a number of floating artificial environments, linked perhaps by a domestic teleportation network? How does the teleportation system work? What effect does the enormous gravity of the planet have upon the lives and the psychology of the people living there? What is the purpose of the Neptune colony? Is it perhaps mining materials for use on Earth? What are the political situations prevailing on Earth at this point in history and how do they affect the lives of the colonists? How long have the people been there? Have they been there long enough to properly develop their own separate culture? If so, what sort of paintings do they create and what sort of music do they make? Is it oppressive and claustrophobic art as a result of the pressures of living in such an enclosed environment, or are the pictures and pieces of music full of light and space to compensate for the habituating surroundings that the colonists are forced to endure? How is law maintained on the colony world? What sort of social problems exist? Are Earthmen the only species that has managed to colonize the world or are there any other alien races involved? Indeed, has mankind encountered any alien races at all in the decades leading up to the time our story is set or is he still alone in the universe as far as he knows? What does the economy work like on this place? How do people dress? How are the families set up?

This is the process I went through

inorganic substances of any kind. Little more than that was ever revealed, and that was deemed sufficient. All that’s really needed is to show a couple of futuristic-looking buildings that appear pretty much the same as buildings on any other world in the 30th century and have a little caption explaining the dietary abnormalities of its inhabitants. Or at least, that was all that was needed to satisfy the readers of the early ’60s. Since then, the rapid increment of information about our world available from the media has made even the younger readers all too painfully aware that a world is a complex place composed of many different interacting factors. A new approach to the problem that is more in keeping with contemporary perceptions seems to be required.

The best way, it seems to me, is to first consider the environment that you are working with as a whole, in detail, before ever putting pen to paper. Before writing V, for example, I came up with a mass of information about the world and the people in it, much of which will never be revealed within the strip for the simple reason that it isn’t stuff that’s essential for the readers to know and there probably won’t be space to fit it all in. That isn’t important. What is important is that the writer should have a clear picture of the imagined world in all its detail inside his or her head at all times. Returning to our Neptunian colony world for a moment, let’s run through the sort of details which are essential to arriving at a clear picture of the world.

Firstly, how do human beings manage to live on Neptune? What are the physical problems that would
when coming up with the world of the Warpsmiths and the way their culture was constructed. I went through the same process with *Halo Jones* and *V for Vendetta*. The point is that once you have worked out the world in all its minute detail you are able to talk about it with complete confidence in a casual manner without hitting your reader over the head with a lot of exposition.

Howard Chaykin did it with *American Flagg*. He worked out the brand names and the TV shows and the attitudes to fashion and the political problems, and then he just went straight into his story and let the readers pick it up as they went along. In the first issue of *Flagg* we see snatches of TV shows and advertising billboards that give us a much more real impression of the way that these people think and live than any amount of explanatory caption boxes would have. Also, the story has the advantage of seeming much more natural since it follows almost exactly the way in which we perceive an alien culture if we happen to go abroad for our holidays. We don’t necessarily understand everything about the culture straight away, but gradually as we pick up on the details surrounding us we get a complete sense of the whole of the environment, its unique atmosphere and the social elements which shape it. When a writer handles the environment in this way we don’t get a sense of having a wealth of extraneous detail forced upon us just because the writer wants to let us know how thorough he’s been in thinking it through. Instead we get a sense of a completely realized and credibly detailed world where things are still going on off-panel, even if the story isn’t focusing upon them. A logically constructed world for your story to be set in will go a long way to suspending the disbelief of your readership and dragging them into the state of hypnosis that I mentioned in the last chapter.

While the comments above refer specifically to created environments, if you’re tackling a place that actually exists you have to be every bit as thorough in your conception of the world that you are showing. When I started writing *Swamp Thing* I read up on Louisiana and the bayou as much as I had time for and managed to glean a just-about functional working knowledge of its plant and animal life, and general makeup. I know that water hyacinths form in a thick sheet upon the top of the water and make it appear to be solid ground, and that they grow so fast that at times in the past they have had to be practically
burned out before they entirely overwhelmed the swamp. I know that alligators eat rocks, believing them to be turtles, and then are unable to digest them. This is why alligators have such shitty tempers. I know that the local Cajun Indians are referred to as "coonass" by the non-Cajuns as a type of racial slur and that the Cajuns have made a virtue of the insult by coming up with bumper stickers that read "Proud to be coonass." I know that the most popular Cajun name is Boudreaux. If I want a realistic-sounding name for an ordinary citizen of Louisiana I look in my Houma telephone directory until I come across one which strikes me as having a nice ring to it: Hattie Duplantis is a nice name, So is Jody Hebert. If I want to know which highway a character would have to take to get from Houma up to Alexandria I look it up in a gazetteer of the United States. It's the tiny little details like this that will make your depiction of a specific place convincing and realistic. They can be dropped casually into the pictures or the dialogue without fanfare and will probably be more convincing the more trivial and unimportant they seem to be.

Of course, when considering an environment it is not only the physical reality of the place that must be understood but also the emotional and atmospheric reality. Take Batman's Gotham City, for example. Is it just another version of New York? Is it a massive quaint playland for overgrown kids filled with giant typewriters and giant jack-in-the-boxes, populated by creatures like Bat-Mite and eccentrically malicious buffoons like the Penguin or the '50s Joker? Is it a dark and paranoid urban landscape straight out of Fritz Lang, terrorized by deformed freaks and monsters, where the only defender is a chilling and remorseless vigilante who dresses as a bat? The way in which you choose to treat the environment will alter the whole mood of the story, and it is as important to the final effect as an understanding of the actual physical factors which make up the world that you are writing about.

All right, so now we have our world. What sort of people live in it and how are we best to depict them? This brings us to the apparently highly problematical area of characterization.

The approach to characterization in comic books has evolved, like everything else in this retarded bastard medium, at a painfully slow pace over the last 30 or 40 years. The earliest approach found in comics was that of simple one-dimensional characterization, usually consisting of "This person is good" or "This person is bad." For the comics of the time and the comparatively simple world that they were attempting to entertain, this was perfectly adequate. By the early 1960s, however, times had changed and a new approach to characterization was needed. Thus, Stan Lee invented two-dimensional characterization: "This person is good but has bad luck with girlfriends," and "This person is bad but might just reform and join the Avengers if enough readers write in asking for it." Again, at the time this was breathtakingly innovative and seemed a perfectly good way of producing comics that had relevance to the times in which they were being produced. Progress since that point
has been minimal. In an effort to keep up with the times, the characters themselves have become more extreme, brutal, bizarre or neurotic, but the basic way of portraying them has changed very little. They are still carefully defined two-dimensional characters, maybe with a little verbal window dressing thrown in to liven them up.

I think much of the blame for this state of affairs must rest in the largely unquestioning adherence to the dictum “If a character can’t be summed up in 15 words then the character is no good.” I mean, who says? While it’s certainly possible to sum up the character and motivation of Captain Ahab in a well turned phrase like “This insane amputee with a grudge against a whale,” Herman Melville obviously thought it appropriate to take slightly longer over the job. It seems to me that what is really meant by this largely spurious assertion is somewhat closer to “If a character can’t be summed up in 15 words then it may not sell to an audience of young children, who we assume are of limited intelligence and possess brief attention spans”.

Unwritten laws and conventional wisdoms of this nature really are the bane of the industry, or at least one of the banes of the industry. The problem is that they tend to trap people into a certain way of thinking about things. Obviously, if your character needs to be described in 15 words, you’re going to aim at a 15-word character. Something along the lines of “A cynical police officer whose parents’ murder leads him to wage masked war on crime.” While this may well represent the beginnings of a perfectly workable character, the tendency seems to be that the writer sees no further than that 15-word skeleton. Once or twice in every story, he will make sure that the character says something cynical and thinks back to his career as a police officer. Also, one of the supporting characters will probably say “Honestly! You’re so cynical!” To which our hero will reply, “What did you expect, babe? Remember, I used to be a police officer!” If the writer is comparatively skillful, minor quirks of personality will be introduced into the scheme. It is revealed, for example, that our cynical ex-police officer also collects stamps. Weirdly, this will usually somehow tied back in to the initial 15-word premise: “Well, here I am, sitting with my album in front of me, licking hinges. Of course, I wouldn’t be doing this if I were still a police officer. In fact, the more I think about the situation, the more cynical I feel.”

If the writer is adventurous, he might feel the need to explore the character in greater depth. The problem is that however deep the pool of the character’s soul might turn out to be it’s still only 15 words wide. Maybe the writer will devote an entire issue to the character, attempting to unlock the mysteries of his past by means of a flashback or something. The story will have a central point and a theme, as stories should have, probably along the lines of “What was it that made this character so cynical?” Over the next 20 or so pages we run through the character’s formative years, until we reach the apocalyptic event at the very core of the story. “I was just standing there, looking at my stamp album and the priceless collection that it had taken
me years to build, when all of a
sudden I realized that since I had
foolishly pasted all of them directly
into the album using an industrial-
strength adhesive, they were
completely worthless. I understood
then that the universe was just a cruel
joke upon mankind, and that life was
pointless. I became completely
cynical about human existence and
saw the essential stupidity of all effort
and human striving. At this point I
decided to join the police force."

The point is that since the initial
working assumptions upon which the
characters are built are limited and
increasingly unworkable, so too are
the characters themselves. If comic
writers are going to solve the problem
of developing their level of
characterization to a level where it’s
in keeping with the times, perhaps it
wouldn’t be a bad idea to throw away
some of these outdated templates
and come at the problem from another
angle. A logical place to start would
be to simply go and look at some real
people. Consider the character
makeup of people around you and
consider your own personality as
well, in as cold and objective a light as
is possible. After a little while you
may discover that almost nobody can
be summed up in 15 words, at least
not in any meaningful or relevant
way. You might also notice that
people change their personality
depending on whom they are talking
to. They have a different voice in
conversations with their parents from
the voice that they use when
addressing their workmates. They
vary their attitude and their mood
hour by hour. Often they will do
things that seem completely out of
character. Simple and unremarkable
observations such as these help to
gear the creative mind toward a more
complete understanding of
characterization than can be afforded
by any snappy little generalizations
about the phenomenon.

It’s worth looking at how people
in other fields solve the problem of
human verisimilitude. An artist who
wants to learn how to realistically
draw the human body will probably
start out by drawing from life,
observing the way that people stand
and bend and move. Unless they are
incredibly stupid they won’t attempt
to capture life by following a dubious
pronunciation like “Good-looking
figures all have big chins” or
something of that nature.

Study yourself and the people
around you in detail, and try to miss
nothing...every little vocal tic and
hesitation, every vague nuance of
body posture or unconscious hand
gesture. Listen to the way that they talk and try to re-create their voices in your head with all the quirks and mannerisms intact. While in all probability you will never in your entire career succeed in creating a character who is completely true to life, the effort will at least bring you nearer to this goal and to an understanding of the problems involved.

Another useful tool for characterization can be gleaned from the field of the theatre. I've mentioned before that I try to take a method-acting approach to characterization when possible, and it seems to yield reasonable results. As an example of how I'd approach a character by this method, I'd cite the way that the Demon was handled in issues #25-#27 of Swamp Thing. Working out the personality of Jason Blood presented no real difficulties, but since the Demon himself was actually meant to be a creature from Hell I realized that his psychology and inner workings would require some thought. I knew that he was a short and stocky character, and it struck me that he'd probably be enormously dense and tough, just as a result of living and surviving in Hell on a day-to-day basis. I imagined his weight to be massive, as if he were made of solid iron, and his internal body temperature to be roughly as hot as magma. This suggested a sort of feverish intensity in his thoughts and actions, along with a crushingly heavy and earthbound mass as a result of his sheer density.

I noticed that in Steve and John's original sketches for their proposed treatment of the character the fangs were more pronounced and the mouth has a slightly cat-like cleft in the upper lip. This suggested that the voice of the character would be slightly malformed, the speech impeded by the deformation of the lip and teeth.

Armed with all this information, I closed the curtains of my workroom so that the neighbors wouldn't worry and send out for a social worker or anything, and then I tried to imagine what it would actually feel like to be that character. I imagined the immense weight of my body, which was now much smaller, and saw that this would give the movements of the body a sort of terrible momentum. In keeping with the feral nature suggested by the front teeth I tried out the sensation of hunching myself up like Quasimodo and squatting slightly as I walked. After I felt that I had the physical feel of the character I tried the voice, thrusting my front teeth out and curling my upper lip until it became difficult to talk clearly. Making any sort of sense at all seemed to necessitate talking very slowly, which suggested a sort of slowed-down gramophone quality to the voice, very deep and guttural. Eventually I realized that the exact voice I was looking for was a sort of electronically treated version of Charles Laughton's voice in "Mutiny on the Bounty." Having sorted out the voice and the posture of the character, you can fix the impression in your mind to summon up when the time comes around to put the character through their paces and producing realistic dialogue for them to speak.

One conclusion I've come to is that almost everybody has a practically infinite number of facets to their personality but chooses to
focus upon no more than a handful for most of the time. We all have areas within ourselves that are cruel, mean-spirited, cowardly, lecherous, violent, greedy... if describing a character with those attributes we must be prepared to look in the eye the areas of our personality that we feel least comfortable with and make an honest appraisal of what we see. Conversely, all of us have sides that are noble, heroic, unselfish or loving, whether we care to admit to them or not. In creating a noble character, you should first try to see whatever spark of nobility there might be in you, however unlikely the prospect of its existence might be during your bleaker moments.

The more adventurous you become with characterization, the more confident you become about tackling some of the more specific and knotty problems of the craft. As a white male writer, for example, and a practicing heterosexual, how am I to write about a homosexual character, or a Black character, or a woman? Theoretically, of course, it should be easier to write about people of another race, gender or sexual inclination than about sentient vegetable consciousness, alienated übermenschen or creatures from the pit. Where this comes unstuck is that if you get the characterization of your walking vegetable wrong, you aren’t going to offend anybody or hurt anybody or misrepresent anybody that actually exists. Dealing with the vast multitude of different character types that you’ll probably create in the course of your writing career is at once absorbing and demanding. One day you’ll be a child murderer in New York, the next a sentient crystalline creature on Altair 4, the next a 70-year-old nun working with the survivors of a second plague of London during the year 2237. You’ll be forced to consider people who are either politically or morally offensive to you and try to understand them.

This can sometimes be personally, as well as professionally rewarding, but the main result is that in writing about characters during the course of your work you will take the right degree of care and aspire to the required degree of authenticity or stylization with a complete grasp of the principles involved. Remember that everybody in the story is a character, even if they only happen to stroll across the background without speaking and are never seen again. Every time you commence a story you are creating a world and populating it. Even if you can’t afford to take the time to spend the customary seven days over this every time, you should at least make sure that you give it as much thought as is necessary.
Now that we have our idea, our structure, our approach to storytelling, our environment and our characters sorted out, I suppose we might as well think about coming up with a plot (although as you may have gathered if you’ve read much of my work I very often can’t be bothered with this formality). So, what the hell is a plot? What does it look like?

One thing that might be helpful to muse upon is what a plot isn’t. A plot isn’t the main point of the story or the story’s main reason for existing. It is something that is there more to enhance the central idea of the story and the characters who will be involved in it than to dominate them and force them to fit its restrictions. Coming up with a straightforward mechanical plotline isn’t difficult at all, and there are plenty of tried and tested formulas to fall back on, especially within the comic industry. What is difficult is to come up with a plot worthy of a reaction stronger than “So what?” The words “So what?” are an almost magical incantation that will reveal whether your plot ideas really have what it takes to actually reach an audience and say something to them.

Gamma Man escapes from prison and runs amok, intent on taking revenge upon his arch-foe Really Terrific Man. After a prolonged fight, Really Terrific Man understands that if he can cut Gamma Man off from the gamma rays that are the source of his power, his foe will weaken and collapse. He melts down some lead pipes from the plumber’s yard where they happen to be fighting and pours the molten lead over the indestructible Gamma Man, who immediately freezes to motionlessness, leaving Really Terrific Man the victor. So what? Really Terrific Man is worried that his powers are gradually fading away just when Gamma Man bursts out of the block of lead six issues later seeking
hideous revenge, but by the end of that issue the fluke sunspot activity that caused his temporary lack of might has passed, allowing him to beat the shit out of Gamma Man and then imprison him at the Earth’s core. So what? Really Terrific Man is in love with the cleaning woman who tidies up his secret fortress for him, but he daren’t ask her to marry him in case this makes her a target for his enemies. So what?

What seems to me to be a disproportionate amount of effort is expended on coming up with madly elaborate plots involving dozens of characters, these plots having no relevance at all to anything other than themselves. Pick up an average current comic and put it to your ear and you can almost hear the process at work: Plot, plot, plot, plot, plot...it sounds like someone wading through mud and it very often reads like it, too. An obsession with the demands of a concrete and linear plotline is often one of the most dependable ways to crush all the life and energy from your story and make it simply an exercise in mechanical narration.

Naturally, while I’d like to point out that to overemphasize the importance of the plot may be ultimately destructive to the work as a whole, there are obviously some stories that demand a more complex plot. Using different examples from my own work I’d refer you to a couple of the “Time Twisters” that I did for 2000 AD. One of them, “The Reversible Man,” had no plot at all other than a straightforward recounting of a totally average life with all of the events in reverse order. The other story, “Chronocops,” had one of the most complex plots that I’ve come up with in my career thus far, due to the necessity to work several convoluted time paradoxes into the story so that it could still be read and enjoyed in a coherent fashion.

What I’m trying to say is that there are some stories where the plot will be the most important thing, its ingeniousness and the skilled execution of its twists and turns being the thing that excites the reader. A lot of short science-fiction stories are plot-oriented, at least as that genre is represented in comics, along with other short story formats such as the horror yarn as treated by EC and its many imitators. Most murder mysteries are almost entirely plot-oriented, and no one would deny that the fiction of Raymond Chandler counts Chandler’s exquisite plotting as one of its greatest assets. Obviously, a knowledge of plot is important. It simply mustn’t be allowed to dominate the entire work in an unhealthy way, nor be seen in such rigid and restricting linear terms. Returning to the example of Chandler, even though plotting was one of his strong points he never allowed it to dominate and subvert the entire story. The thing that one is left with after reading, say, The Big Sleep, is not so much a detailed memory of the turns of the plot but rather a vivid picture of a weary but unflinchingly moral character trying to come to terms with a moral twilight world where no one ever seems to have all their cards on the table and where lies and half-truths and threats become the main social currency. Chandler’s point in most of his fiction seems to be in conveying this
sense of the world through the perceptions of Philip Marlowe or whoever. The plot is there as something more to move the reader’s interest through this world, taking in the sights, and to provide an illustration of the way events seem to work in this harsh and treacherous landscape.

So, given that a plot is important, how does one go about coming up with one? The best answer that I have come across to date is the same answer that applies to most of the questions that have been raised during this ramble: Look at the whole thing, and try to see the whole shape before you attempt to get down to specifics and describe the parts. What is a plot? A plot is the combination of environment and characters with the single element of time added to it. If the combination of environment and characters can be called “the situation,” then plot is a situation as seen in four dimensions.

Using an example that I’ve borrowed from Brian Aldiss’ excellent “Report on Probability A,” let’s think about something other than comics to give us a different perspective on the idea. Let’s consider a specific painting. The painting is The Hireling Shepherd by the Pre-Raphaelite William Holman Hunt.

In this painting, we see a woman sitting facing us in the foreground with a beautiful and luminous pastoral landscape behind her, bathed in the golden light of late afternoon. Crouching or kneeling just behind the woman we see a young man, the hireling shepherd of the title. He has one of his arms raised behind her shoulder, as if he is about to establish physical intimacy by wrapping the arm around her. However, at the moment depicted in the painting his hand has not yet touched her. Trapped in the palm of the hand there is a tiny death’s-head moth. The expressions of both the handsome shepherd and the young woman are ambiguous. The shepherd seems lustful while the woman seems coquettish. Seen in another light his expression is slightly more sinister while hers becomes one of suppressed alarm. Behind the pair, in the gold-drenched English fields, a herd of sheep wander about aimlessly, untended and unprotected while the shepherd dallies with the young beauty on the grassy ridge up above their pasture. The shepherd seems to smile as he prepares to show the young woman the death’s-head moth, and she doesn’t seem displeased by this advance. The sheep graze, the moth
flutters, the moment is frozen, with neither past nor resolution. It's a single second taken out of a story of which we know nothing else. We do not know anything of the previous lives of these characters. We don't know where the shepherd grew up or even where he spent the previous night. We don't know if the woman just happened to chance by that way or whether she had previously agreed to meet the young man at that spot.

Of their future we know even less. When he shows her the moth will she be enchanted or repulsed? Will they make love, or just talk, or perhaps argue? What will become of the sheep, left untended? With an eye to the seemingly ominous symbolism of the death's-head moth, is something darker implied? Not necessarily something melodramatic like the possibility that the shepherd is about to strangle the girl, but maybe some comment on mortality and the ways in which we squander the substance of our lives? Is this eternal moment that we see, captured from the canvas, a moment from the beginning of a relationship or the end of same? The beauty of a good painting is that the mind and feelings can wander endlessly around inside it, following their own paths and moving at their own pace through the timeless place that the painting represents. The Hireling Shepherd shows us a situation. The situation does not change or move, but we ourselves may move around within it, mentally, enjoying the subtle shifts in perspective and meaning.

Now, if we add the dimension of time to that situation, the work of art is completely altered. Instead of having infinite possibilities, if the situation in the painting is to progress through time it must follow only one route. The structuring of events along this route is a plot. The girl in the painting notices the death's-head moth and is both intrigued and a little frightened by it. Led thus into conversation with the charismatic hireling shepherd, the woman finds herself equally fascinated by him. They make love, after first setting free the moth. After their lovemaking is done they discover that the herd of sheep have been stolen or spirited away during the interim. Rather than face the wrath of the irate farmer who had hired him to tend the sheep, the footloose, drifting worker decides to leave the neighborhood without reporting the theft and seek employment in the next county. After a number of weeks, the woman realizes she is pregnant. Her father and brothers learn of this and swear to track down the hireling shepherd and offer him a choice of marriage or death...and so on and so on. Admittedly, the above is a clumsy and ugly extrapolation with none of the poetry or charm or subtlety of the original painting, but I think it makes the point that plotting is a sort of four-dimensional phenomenon, taking time to be the fourth dimension. The situation shown in the painting is a representation of a three-dimensional world that with the addition of time becomes four-dimensional and changes from a situation into a plot.

Thus, to consider the plotting process in any worthwhile way you must try to think in four-dimensional terms. See the world that your characters inhabit as a continuum with a past, a present and a future. See the shape of the whole thing, and you
will be more able to see how the elements within that overall design relate to each other with much greater clarity. Watchmen was conceived in precisely this way. The story starts in October 1985 and ends a few months later. In terms of real time, that is the framework of the story, and I have all of the events within that period precisely worked out. In broader terms, however, the story concerns events going as far back as 1940, with individual sequences set in the '60s, the '70s, the '50s, the '40s...what we get an impression of, hopefully, is a world with a credible sense of depth and history, along with characters that share the same quality. In being able to see a 45-year sweep of history relating to the world my story is set upon before ever attempting to write a single syllable about that world, I’m given the advantage of being able to notice patterns of events and events which somehow mirror each other conceptually, interesting potential elements of the story and its telling that I can bring out as the story progresses. I notice opportunities to tie together elements of the plot or the thematic structure of the book and present a more coherent and effective whole as a result. Also, since I have the history of the world and its various characters mapped out in advance, I will perhaps notice an interesting juxtaposition of characters or events which would logically happen at some point in the story and which suggest an interesting scene or piece of action or exchange of dialogue.

Establish your continuum as a four-dimensional shape with length, breadth, depth and time, and then pick out the single thread of narrative that leads you most interestingly and most revealingly through the landscape that you’ve created, whether it be a literal landscape or some more abstract and psychological terrain. This thread of narrative is your plot. As the plot moves through the well-visualized continuum that you have created for it to exist in, you will find that it's easy to get a realistic and nicely underplayed impression of a whole real world going on beyond the confines of the actual story that we happen to be telling. Just by knowing all the trivial little details regarding the continuum containing your central stream of narrative, you will find that the essential minor elements that give a story a credible context to exist in will find a way naturally into your narrative without the need to be forced. A good example of this would be the worlds that Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez created for their major contributions to Love and Rockets. In Jaime’s “Locas, Tambien” and “Mechanics” storylines we have a sense of a whole mass of credible detail hovering just beyond the borders of the panels and the confines of the story itself. After seeing the name referred to in various bits of graffiti for months we finally learn that “Missiles of October” is the name of Hopey’s band in just the same casual way that we find out that her second name is Glass or that Maggie’s auntie, Vicky Glori, once had a hotly contested championship bout with Rena Titanon during Titanon’s wrestling days. In “Heartbreak Soup” Gilbert has done an equally impressive job on his depiction of the community of Palomar over a period of 15 or 20
years of story time. We see Jesus and Heracio and Vicente and the others grow up and settle into their own distinctive adult lifestyles. We see Sheriff Chello start her career as a Banadora ("a woman who washes men") before being squeezed out of business by the beautiful Luba and being forced to take to law enforcement. In later sequences we see how perfectly she has taken to her new vocation and we see that she is gradually becoming slimmer and more attractive, even as Luba starts to look increasingly strained and conscious of how much she misses the freedom of her youth, along with an awareness perhaps of the passing of her beauty. The world is real and three-dimensional. It takes 15 years of story time before we start to realize that Vicente is more upset by his disfigurement than he originally seemed to be. We watch as children with different mothers, both sired by the since-deceased young hearthrob Manuel, playing together during a public feast and holiday while grown-up life goes on all about them. We have a sense of a complete continuum, within which everything takes on its own degree of importance and becomes a vital part of the overall work of art.

All right...in the previous Lord knows how many pages, we have considered different approaches to structure, storytelling, environment and characterization along with the nature of a plot and the importance of a central idea. Bearing all of the above notions in mind, we can finally proceed to start work on the script itself.

We have an idea we wish to communicate and a plot that underlines and reveals the idea in an interesting way. We have solid, rounded characters for the story to happen to and an equally solid and credible world for it to happen in. The first step is to take our story, which presumably we will have arrived at with an eye to how many pages are available to print it in, and see exactly how well it fits into the given restrictions that we have. As an example for how this process works, I'd cite 1985's Superman Annual #11. The idea behind the story was to examine the concept of escapism and fantasy dreamworlds, including happy times in the past that we look back on and idealize, and longed-for points in the imagined future when we will finally achieve whatever our goal happens to be. I wanted to have a look at how useful these ideas actually are and how wide the gap is between the fantasy and any sort of credible reality. It was a story, if you like, for the people I've encountered who are fixated upon some point in the past where things could have gone differently or who are equally obsessed with some hypothetical point in the future when certain circumstances will have come to pass and they can finally be "happy." People who say, "If only I hadn't married that man or that woman. If only I'd stayed in college, left college earlier, settled down, gone off to see the world, got that job I turned down..." or who say, "When the mortgage is paid off, then I can enjoy myself. When I'm promoted and I get more money, then I can have a good time. When the divorce comes through, when the kids are grown up, when I finally manage to get my novel published..." These people are
not have been as happy as it looks at first glance, finally leading Superman to throw off the fantasy and see it for what it is. At the same time he sees his useless nostalgia for a vanished planet as it really is, and learns something about himself from the experience.

Okay...so the problem is how to present that plot and its attendant idea within the restrictions that are imposed by the length of the book, the market it is aimed at and so forth. The most immediate and concrete restriction is that the book is 40 pages long. This means that I must fit my story into that precise length without it appearing either crammed or padded out unnecessarily. Thus, my first step is usually to take a piece of paper and write the numbers one to 40 down the left-hand side. I then start to sketch in the scenes about which I already have some ideas and try to work out how many pages they will take up.

I’ve already worked out that I want to present a contrast between the world of Krypton in Superman’s dreams and the external reality of his situation, standing paralyzed in the Fortress of Solitude with an alien fungus clinging to his chest and feasting from his bio-aura. In order for this to work, I need something interesting to be going on in the Fortress of Solitude while Superman is asleep, so that I can cut between an involving scene in the dreamworld and an equally engaging scene taking place simultaneously in the “real world.” Since in terms of the plot it happened to be Superman’s birthday, it seemed logical that a couple of his superhuman pals might be visiting and provide the opportunity for some
interesting incidental conflict with Mongul, the villain of the piece, who is also visiting the Fortress to survey his handiwork. Given all this, I sat down and worked out a sequence of events that appeared logical and that described what happened to Superman’s chums (Wonder Woman, Batman and Robin, as it turned out; I originally wanted to use Supergirl but then Julie Schwartz informed me that she’d be popping her bright red clogs during Crisis on Infinite Earths and suggested that I use Wonder Woman instead) from their arrival at the Fortress bearing presents for Superman.

The rough schematic would run something as follows: They arrive, and we establish their characters in a few brief strokes and show how they react to each other. With their dialogue, we establish the basic situation, and let the reader know that it’s Superman’s birthday. We establish that both Wonder Woman and the Dynamic Duo have brought gifts—Wonder Woman has a large parcel that she refuses to disclose the contents of, while Batman and Robin have had a special rose named “The Krypton,” bred in honor of the occasion. Upon entering the Fortress, they find Superman with a strange growth of black roses seemingly growing from his chest. He is immobile and totally insensate. While they are trying to figure out what’s going on, Mongul announces his presence and reveals the rest of the salient plot details both to the three superheroes and to the readers. Wonder Woman attempts to tackle him and is singled out for a brutal beating which knocks her across the trophy hall of the Fortress and through the wall into the weapons room, where the alien weaponry proves useless against Mongul. Meanwhile, Batman is coolly trying to revive Superman as the only real hope of saving the situation. More as a result of Superman’s growing disenchantment with the fantasy world he is in than by Batman’s efforts, the black-rose creature comes loose and grabs hold of Batman instead. It is at this point, freed from the creature’s influence, that Superman wakes up. The fantasy he has been living through is over and the two strands of narrative merge into one again as events start to build towards the issue’s climax.

Okay...now having worked that out I had to work out a similar schematic of events concerning the happenings inside Superman’s skull: We open in Kryptonopolis, where we establish that Superman is living as Kal-El, who has a wife and two children and works long and tiring hours as an archaeologist. We learn that Krypton seems to be in a state of social decline, having passed the peak of its civilization. Kal-El’s father, Jor-El, has been spurned by the science community since his predictions concerning the doom of Krypton proved to be unfounded, and with the death of his wife Lara he has become a frustrated and embittered old man who flirts with extremist political groups in an attempt to halt the decline that he sees in the standards of Kryptonian life. This brings him into conflict with his more liberal son, and the two have become estranged. We see events start to come to a head as we learn that Kal-El’s cousin, Kara, has been attacked and wounded by armed members of a
group campaigning for the abolition of the Phantom Zone and bearing a grudge against anyone even remotely related to that device's inventor, Jor-El. Alarmed by this development we see Kal-El and his family attempting to flee Kryptonopolis against a backdrop of torchlight parades, riots and demonstrations as Krypton starts to slide faster and faster towards collapse. Finally, Kal can no longer accept the terms of the fantasy, and is no longer prepared to pay the miserable price required in order to sustain it. He breaks free of the fantasy to find Batman is now a prisoner of the plant that induced the dream, as the two strands of narrative bond together.

The next step was to try to integrate these sequences into a coherent whole, so that they ran in parallel for the first approximate half of the 40-page book. This meant that I had to allocate so many pages to Superman's fantasy and so many pages to the scenes inside the Fortress with Batman and company, deciding roughly what went on each page with an eye to making each page roughly a complete scene in itself. I knew that all this stuff needed to go at the beginning of the book, covering the first 25 or so sides. This meant that I must intercut between the two strands of narrative at well-timed junctures and try to bring both strands toward the boil at roughly the same time. In establishing a good beginning for the story I had an immediate choice: Either I could start with the arrival of the visiting superheroes or I could dump the reader straight in at the deep end without any explanation by starting with Superman's fantasy. Since it seemed more likely that this latter course would tend to surprise and intrigue the reader, I chose to open with a scene set upon the illusory Krypton of Superman's parasite-induced imaginings. Hopefully, the effect upon the reader should have been something along the lines of "Huh? Where are we? On Krypton? But Krypton exploded. Is this story happening in the past? "Nope—there's Kal-El, and he's the same age he is now, but he looks sort of different. He looks ordinary, and he's wearing glasses and he has a straight job and a wife and a couple of kids. What's going on here?" If this first page is sufficiently intriguing, then you've gone a long way towards hooking the reader. Having established the basic situation upon this imaginary Krypton, we turn over the page and cut straight to the Arctic Circle, for the arrival of Superman's three birthday visitors. As they pursue a hopefully natural and yet casually revealing dialogue, they make their way into the Fortress. Since I'm aware that pages 2 and 3 are on left-hand and right-hand pages respectively, it would seem advantageous to save any big visual surprise until page 4, so that the reader doesn't see it until he turns over. Thus, page 3 ends with a teaser. Having entered the Fortress, the three heroes are staring at us in surprise and dawning horror, looking at something off-panel that we cannot see. This hopefully suggests something sufficiently intriguing to get the reader to turn the page over to page 4. Since there's an ad break immediately after page 4 and since I quite like having a full-page splash panel, just to give the title of the story and its suggested premise some weight and moment and to signify that the story
has started in proper, page 4 is the splash. Thus, on the fourth page, we see what Batman and Robin and Wonder Woman are seeing: Superman, standing there frozen with a hideous black-red growth spilling from his breast. With any luck, the reader is intrigued by this unusual state of affairs enough to move past the ad for Fig Newtons and Apple Newtons to page 5 of the story overleaf, where we have a page showing the reactions of Superman’s buddies as they try to find out what’s wrong with their comrade. The page ends with a close-up of Superman’s face staring out of the foreground at us while Batman, standing behind him, remarks that he’s in a world of his own. We move our eyes upward to the top of page 6.

Here, we have an image that echoes the picture in the previous panel. Once more, Kal-El stares out of the foreground at us, but now we are back on Krypton, in Superman’s dream, quite literally in “a world of his own.” Thus, the coincidence of images and the irony of Batman’s remark provide a smooth and semi-meaningful transition between the two scenes without losing the readers’ attention. On page 6 we show the relationship between Kal-El and his wife with some degree of additional detail and use their dialogue to fill in the reader regarding a little of what their situation is. The page ends with a nighttime shot of their apartment building against a beautiful blue and pink night sky, immediately after Kal has mentioned going to see his father the next day.

We turn the page and we have a shot looking up at a different Kryptonian building, this time with a red, yellow and orange morning sky behind it. We are obviously still on Krypton, and it is just as obviously the morning of the following day. We then run through a three-page confrontation between Kal El and his embittered father that ends on page 9 with Jor-El smashing out in futile anger at one of the ornamental glass trees on his terrace and shattering a petrified glass bird, frozen in the act of feeding its young. The last shot is of the parent bird’s snapped-off glass head, a glass worm still held in its beak. Even as this provides an image symbolic of the break in the father-son relationship between Kal-El and his old man, it ties in obliquely with the overlapping caption box affixed to that panel. This is a sort of voice-over from the following scene reading, “Really, it’s just a matter of putting the pieces together,” this sentence actually relating to
Batman's comment on the deductive process as applied to finding out what's wrong with Superman but also having apparent relevance to the image of the broken bird lying there in pieces that are impossible to put back together. This leads us into page 10, which commences a four-page scene in which Mongul arrives and picks a fight with Wonder Woman. It ends with Mongul saying, "Thank you. I think that's answered my question," while reaching for Wonder Woman as in the background Superman stands immobile looking on, his eyes unseeing. On the next page we have a scene back on Krypton, at the hospital. In the foreground, we have Supergirl's mother, Allura. In the background, in roughly the same position relative to the foreground figures as he was in the preceding panel, Kal-El is entering the hospital from the dark city outside. Allura, desperately quizzing a nurse about her daughter's condition, says "I asked you a question." This continues in a similar fashion, cutting back and forth by various methods, until we reach page 25 and the awakening of Superman.

Having mapped out the first half of the book, I was able to see how much space I had to get in the things that needed to happen at the end. I knew, for example, that I needed a good strong last page, preceded by a couple of pages just spent dealing with the aftermath of the action and establishing a mood of returned normality and reflection upon the lessons that have been learned. This took up roughly four pages at the end. This meant that pages 26 to 36 were left for the final climactic battle between Superman and Mongul, which seemed about the right sort of length.

Using the same rough procedures as above, I then broke down this 10-page action sequence into a hopefully interesting flow of minor events as Superman and Mongul paste each other around the interior of the Fortress. To work this out, I referred extensively to an already established schematic of the Fortress loaned to me by Dave "Fanboy" Gibbons. I knew that Superman would first come upon Mongul in the weapons room, where the giant alien was still beating up Wonder Woman. If Mongul punched Superman hard enough to drive him upwards through the ceiling, he would end up in the alien zoo, immediately above. Knocking each other along the length of the zoo, they would push through into the communications room with its computer archives. If at this point they managed to smash each other through the floor they would find themselves sprawled on the ground in front of the giant statue of Jor-El and Lara holding the globe of Krypton between them, which is immediately below. This seemed like a good place to conclude the battle, with its inherent echo of the world that Superman spent the first half of the story imagining. At the same time as this is going on, we follow the progress of Robin as he tries to both help out and also to get Superman to help him work out what to do with the writhing organism that Robin has by now priced off Batman. He follows the path of destruction that Superman and Mongul have left behind them during their battle, finally happening upon the pair in time to provide the vital element needed to defeat
Mongul. Again, this had to be done naturally, simultaneously bringing both strands of narrative (Robin/parasite and Superman/Mongul) to a head.

Mongul is finally subdued by the organism with which he had intended to trap Superman. After a three-page aftermath in which the heroes relax and chat after the battle we have Batman presenting his specially bred “Krypton” rose, which had been crushed and killed during the fighting. Superman calmly accepts the death of the rose, and by extension the death of Krypton, providing a neat emotional point at which to bring the story to a close with the central idea explored and at least partially resolved. The final page, mirroring the first page of the whole story, lets us have a glimpse into the terrible and blood-thirsty dream reality conjured by Mongul under the parasite’s influence, showing that he is more hopelessly trapped within his own dreams than Superman ever could be, and providing a counterpoint to Superman’s eventual success with his eventual failure.

Fine. Now we have the story completely broken down with an understanding of more or less exactly what goes on each page and in each panel and in each scene, along with an understanding of how all the disparate elements that we’ve considered are working together to form the whole. The only remaining stages are the purely creative final processes of arriving at the correct stream of both verbal and visual narrative. By verbal narrative I mean the exact choice of words and the flow of language that will take the reader through the story upon one level and the precise flow of imagery that will take him or her through the book upon another level.

The fine craft of wordsmithing is important in that clumsy or boring or lifeless language stands a high chance of distracting the reader from the story that you’re trying to tell. You first learn how to use words to the best of your ability, once more applying real thought to the processes involved. What, for example, separates an interesting sentence from a dull one? It’s not the subject matter...a good writer can write about the most mundane object in the world and make it interesting. It’s something in the arrangement of words that brings the whole structure alive with meaning and makes a powerful impression upon the reader, not in the content of those words. By looking at sentences in the works of others that have appealed to you—whether in a poem or a novel or a comic—it’s possible to see certain patterns that follow similar basic principles to phenomena that we’ve discussed earlier: The element of surprise is very often the most appealing thing about a sentence... the surprising use of a word, or the surprising juxtaposition of two interesting concepts. Using an example that I personally quite liked but which most people seem to find an example of my overwritten at its worst, there was a line in an early Swamp Thing about clouds like plugs of bloodied cotton wool dabbing uselessly at the slashed wrists of the sky. This was a description of a sunset, and the intention was to
describe a thing of unquestioned beauty in very ugly and sordid and depressing terms. I found the juxtaposition of the two sensations stimulating and entertaining, but apparently for a lot of people it crossed over the line into self-parody, which smacks of bad judgment upon my part, but probably something I shall do again and again for the rest of my career. Creating a single story requires that you make thousands and thousands of tiny creative decisions on the basis of whatever theories you hold dear and the application of large measures of intuition. Much as I would it were otherwise, nobody gets it right all the time, and if you have made a mistake the only thing you can do is analyze it, see if you agree with your critics and respond accordingly. Adverse reaction aside, I still believe that the principle of surprise behind the sentence referred to above is sound even if the actual execution left something to be desired.

Along with the surprise content of the language and the concepts in each sentence, there is verbal rhythm to consider. A sentence overloaded with long, multi-syllable words, for example, would probably have a very jerky and unsatisfactory stumbling kind of rhythm in the reader’s head as he or she reads the line, and even more so if they attempt to read it aloud. Be conscious of the rhythm in your writing and of the effect that it has on the tone of your narrative. Long, flowing sentences with lots of lavish imagery will have one effect. Short, sparse sentences delivered in machine-gun fashion will have another. Sometimes, repeating a phrase or a word will give a sequence a rhythm almost like music, where various musical phrases are repeated throughout a piece to lend it structure. Each word-rhythm has its own attributes, and there is an infinite number of different rhythms to be discovered by someone with enough imagination.

Dialogue, as spoken in word balloons, should also have its own individual rhythm, depending on the character delivering it. An excellent rule of thumb for dialogue is to read it aloud and see if it would sound natural enough to deliver in conversation without your friends looking at you in a peculiar fashion and wondering why you’re talking so funny. Most comic book dialogue doesn’t pass this test. Read it out aloud and it sounds phony and ridiculous. By developing an ear for dialogue and being aware of the principles involved, it is fairly simple to avoid this trap and produce
interchanges of dialogue or first-person soliloquies that are authentic and convincing and natural.

The visual narrative of a strip is simply what goes into the pictures. For this, it is vital that a writer thinks visually and takes advantage of how much information it is possible to casually convey within an image without overburdening either the picture with extraneous detail or the captions with lengthy descriptions. Even if your drawing ability is as minimal as my own, it's fairly easy to arrive at a developed visual sensibility by getting into the habit of doing rough thumbnail layouts of each page before you write it, showing the visual elements that go in each panel. You will gain an idea of what it's possible for an artist to show within a panel, and you'll get some notion of how the completed page will hang together in terms of composition: Are there too many full-facial close-ups or full-figure shots? Are they all seen from the same boring angle? Would this panel in the middle where you want to establish a sense of menace be better if it were viewed from directly above, so that we get an almost subliminal sense of something looking down upon the unsuspecting characters below, ready to pounce? Does this four-panel sequence slowly zooming in on the character's eyes take up too much space and upset the page's balance? Would it be better as a three-panel sequence instead, using the leftover panel for something else? Is there too much information crammed into this panel, and if so is there room on the page to split it into two panels so that it reads more smoothly?

Considerations of this sort will allow you to at least provide a workable visual structure for the piece which is coherent and clear enough for the artist to understand the effect you are after and the purpose behind it, and to use as a solid jumping-off point for whatever visual input he or she may care to add to the art and design, bearing in mind that the artist will almost certainly have visual sensibilities 50 times more sound and reliable than your own.

Also, an ability to think visually will allow you to plan the inclusion of numerous small subliminal elements that will greatly enhance the reader's peripheral enjoyment of the story. With a little imagination, it's possible to have tiny events going on unimportantly in the foreground or the background of a picture, seemingly with no relevance to the main story but providing the reader with a subliminal reinforcement of the ideas being discussed in the actual narrative. The reader does not have to notice these elements consciously in order to be affected by them, and it's an excellent if sneaky way of increasing the reader's enjoyment of your story and getting your point over forcefully without being long-winded or intrusive. In the two-part Vigilante story that I did (#17 and #18), for example, there's a scene where the Vigilante and Fever, the female lead character, are driving around the city while Fever is giving the Vigilante an impromptu and somewhat sweeping lecture on the evils of authority and the effect it has on society. As the car drives through the city I asked Jim Baikie to include some unobtrusive bits of background business showing authority in action. In one panel a police officer cautions...
some street punks sitting on the hood of a car. In the next a mother shouts angrily at her reluctant and waiting child. In the next a priest wags his finger at a doubtful-looking elderly woman. All of these incidental details, while unimportant in themselves, add a sort of extra resonance to the things being said in the frame, increasing the story’s sense of reverberation.

And that, basically, is that. Having finished your story, go back and see if there are any bits that need changing, and make the last few minor adjustments necessary to give the right degree of polish. Your comic strip is as good as you’re going to get it and you must wait for long months to see whether the readers think so too, often a very irritating and nail-chewing time when you find yourself going through violent mood swings in which you alternately consider the work to be amongst the best you’ve ever done and then a day later conclude that it’s nothing but misguided and embarrassing drivel from beginning to end and that it will probably mark the end of your career if anyone actually gets to read it. This is an annoying neurosis to be subjected to, but for my part I find that if I’ve become involved enough with the story to give it my best shot, I’m seemingly bound to worry obsessively about it until I actually see it on the rack in Forbidden Planet and realize that it’s in the lap of the gods and that further anxiety is futile.

Reading back through this overlengthy meander I have a sense of wandering all over the place, including a few tangents and the failure to explain things as clearly as I would have liked. This is because the field of writing is so large and complex an endeavor, like any job that you throw yourself into completely, and even a long-winded discourse like this can only begin to scratch the surface of it. There are things that I’ve left out and things that I’ve skipped over with too little explanation, but I hope that in the final analysis there will be at least something that aspiring writers are able to use. If not, I hope that the disjointed and disconnected tone of the piece will serve as a grim warning by demonstrating just what this bizarre and obsessive profession eventually does to your brain. The timid need venture no farther. For the rest, I hope this sketchy preliminary map will at least allow them to avoid the worst of the snake pits and patches of quicksand, and find a career as emotionally and intellectually rewarding as the one which I’m enjoying at present. Good luck.

—ALAN MOORE