

The background of the slide features faint pencil sketches of comic strip panels. At the top, there are several lines of handwritten text in a cursive script, which appear to be notes or dialogue. Below the text, there are sketches of characters' faces and bodies, drawn in a simple, expressive style. The overall tone is creative and informal, reflecting the theme of writing a comic strip.

# NOTES ON WRITING A COMIC STRIP

by Lind

# Creation in a nutshell

My format is somewhat different from that of a longer-form comic book, but not intrinsically so. Many graphic novels start as serialized comic books. The Belgium cartoonist Hergé originally created his classic children's comic *Tintin* in single-page weekly installments. Now collected as 64-page books, each page ends on a "what-will-happen-next?!" or humorous note. This helps the structure of the books, making them addictive page-turners.

Though I dislike reducing the irreducible creative process to a formula, I can try to break it down as follows:

**1. Deciding what to write about.** The inspiration can be a conversation, a phrase that comes to mind (like "same-socks marriage"), an idea for a single image that I then expand into a strip, a burst of anger at, say, the torture of innocents, or an absurd item in the paper (like the menu of a state dinner with Paul Martin and George W. Bush that became the cartoon below). Part of this is finding a framework for the idea to work within the confines of my comic strip: my existing characters and my approach. I may have an idea that I hold for a year or more until I find a way of working it into a cartoon, or an event comes along that

allows it. Currently, I want to do a cartoon on Canada's role in the war in Afghanistan and am still mulling over the topic in search of an angle. I have a framework (Raj is being held in Afghanistan by the Americans) but have yet to find a way to incorporate commentary on the conflict into the strip.

**2. Research.** Often done at the same time as deciding how to approach a topic.

**3. Scripting/brainstorming.** This can take several turns at the drawing board or just an hour, depending on how everything flows.

**4. Rough sketches.** Work out panel size and number, shape cartoon to format, edit script to accommodate space and timing.

**5. Fine tune drawing.** Likely involves further research, this time for photo reference.

**6. Inks.** I use a crow-quill pen on very smooth Linetek paper. Most cartoonists use a brush.

**7. Colour.** Done on computer.



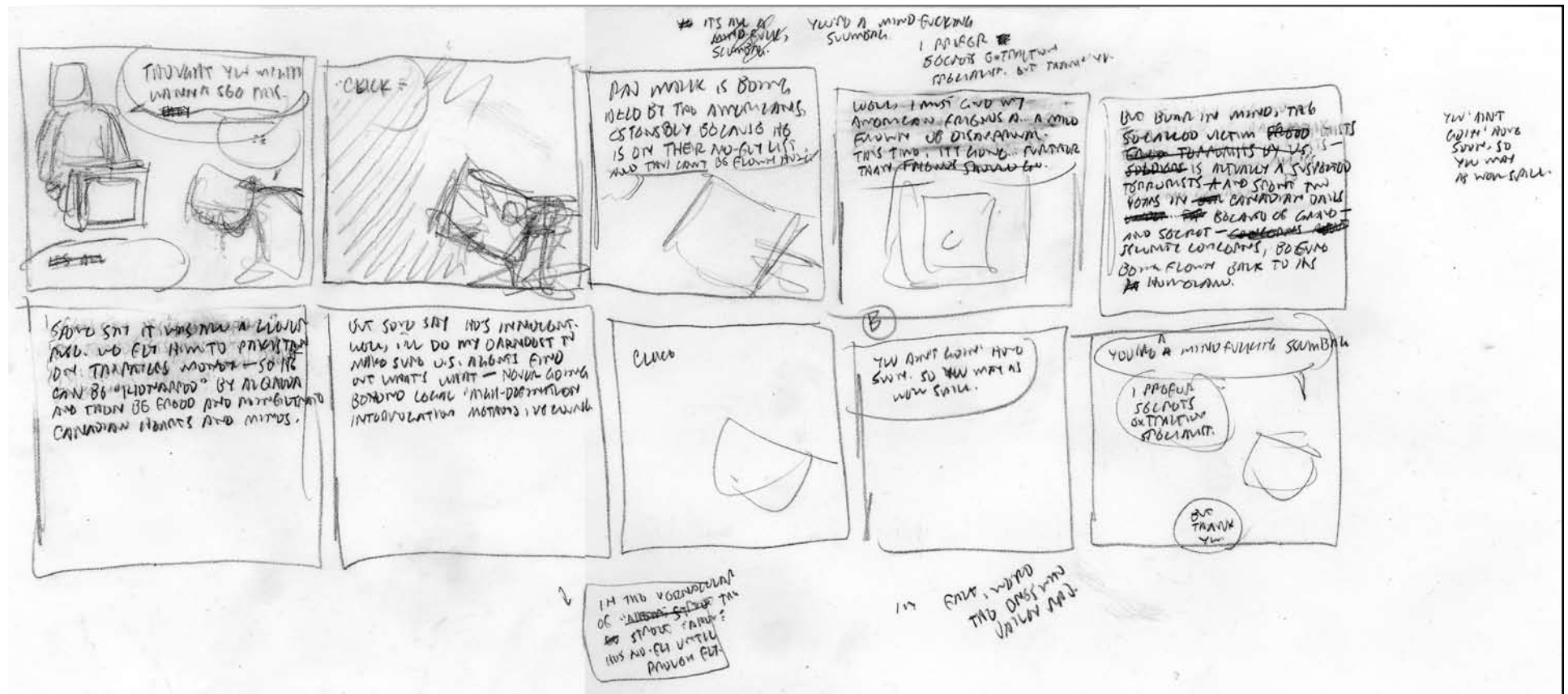
## The process behind this week's Weltschmerz · STEP 1

This is a step-by step look at the writing and drawing of the cartoon that is right off the drawing board. I've chosen this week because I actually have all my roughs.

I reworked elements from a rough script that I thought was too static (see page 10) into a few cartoons that cross-cut between Harper in Canada and Raj being interrogated by the U.S. military in Afghanistan. These will review the events thus far in the long-running saga of the Pakistani-Canadian terrorist suspect, while also moving the plot forward and commenting on the no-fly list and Harper's policies.

My initial step doesn't usually involve any panel-by-panel drawing; rather, it is a bunch of scribbles with arrows linking them and plenty of exploratory paths, later abandoned. But, in this case, I was fairly clear what I wanted: a 10-panel cartoon to suggest staccato edits, switching between Canada and Afghanistan.

Note that the middle is over-written and too expository. I will end up changing this middle section significantly. Also note the punch line: “You’re a mind-fucking scumbag,” says Raj. “I prefer ‘Secrets Extraction Specialist,’” says the interrogator. This will also change.



Here, I've totally rewritten the middle section. Previously, Harper (the one with the nose) seem to sympathize somewhat with Raj, while damning him by saying we can't rule out him being a terrorist. Now, he wants our own, Canadian no-fly list (but has no problem in principle with such a list, nor that Raj is on it). Also, there's an added mid-strip gag where Raj wakes up and says, after seeing our PM on TV, "H-Harper?! Whatever happened to Chrétien?" His interrogator responds with, "Don't get out much, huh?"



## The process behind this week's Weltschmerz • STEP 3

I'm now confident enough with the script to flesh it out at the actual size, which is 15 x 6.75". I use layout paper, which is translucent, so I can trace and develop the drawings. It's a technique I learned in the one cartooning course I took, and was meant to be a tool to develop caricatures – with each redraw, the features would get more and more exaggerated.

I'm still toying with how to end the strip. Raj now says, "So I'm no-fly until proven fly." The American says, "You've retained some 90s street jargon. Now, what were you doing around that time." This is a play on the slang meaning of "fly," which is cool ("no-fly" would then be uncool). But I am worried that reference is too obscure.



## The process behind this week's Weltschmerz • STEP 4

A further step redrawing/rewriting. Harper's speech has been tightened. Harper's eighth-panel speech balloon, a paraphrase of Santa's listmaking that I added in the last rough, inspires me to continue the naughty/nice theme to the punch line and scrap the "no-fly/fly." Then the interrogator's balloon is clear: "You won't be home for Christmas. So spill or eat coal." This echoes the opening line, "Time for news from home!" and dampens any hopes Raj may have had in going there.

My one concern is with timeliness. But I figure Christmas is closer than we want to believe, so that may add to the humour. While not laugh-out-loud funny, I hope it will achieve some poignancy.



## The process behind this week's Weltschmerz • STEP 5

This part of the process is time-consuming but I've grown to enjoy it. I draw on the back of the translucent paper in order to later rub it down onto very smooth, clay-coated board that will accept crow-quill pen and ink without the pen sticking. That's how it started; now I find it an important part of my drawing process to see the whole thing in reverse. I see aspects of the drawing that I otherwise would not see.



## The process behind this week's Weltschmerz • STEP 6

Once the pencils have been transferred to the illustration board with a burnisher (originally meant to rub down now-extinct Letraset), I redraw yet again with pencil and write in the dialogue. Then I ink it, from lower right to upper left to avoid smudging (I'm left-handed). Then I erase the pencils, scan it and add colour using Photoshop and a stylus and tablet. I may also make a few corrections at this stage. My marginal notes are to remind me to do them. Sometimes, on a deadline, I forget what I'd meant to do.

The entire process takes about 12 hours, depending on how long the initial ideas process takes. Inks take a dependable 2.5 hours.



# The final

I've corrected a few words and lines and added colour. This will appear on September 14 in *Eye Weekly*, *Echo*, *View*, *Pulse* and [www.weltschmerz.ca](http://www.weltschmerz.ca).



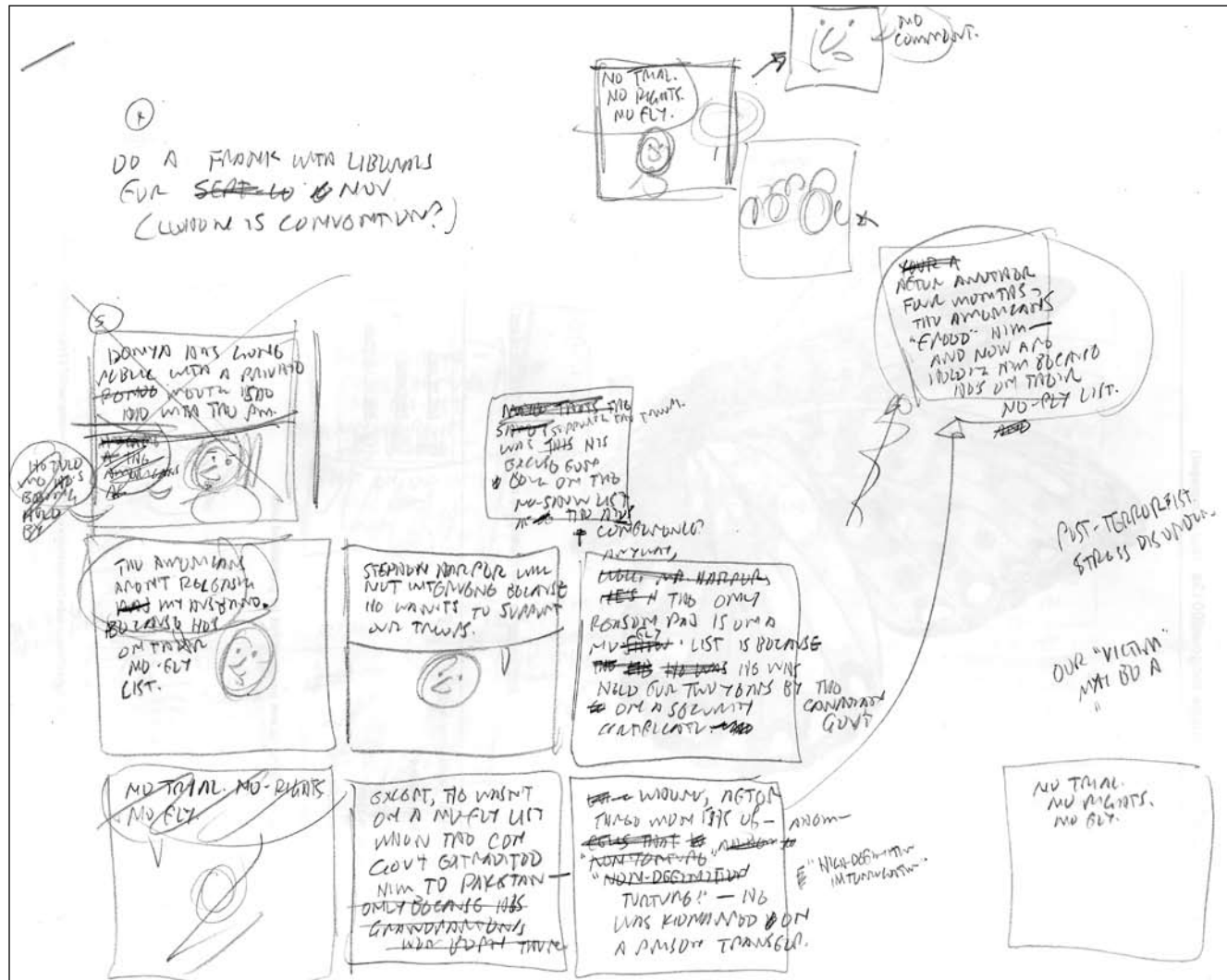
## Show, don't tell

This is a mantra of screenplay writing. It applies equally to comics. (I have found books on writing screenplays useful.) This is a visual medium, so where possible, illustrate the story.

Here, I wanted to give some back story to a plot thread that had been unravelling for four years. So I had Donya give a monologue at in a press conference. But it was static, so I scrapped it.

Instead, I plan to use elements of this in several cartoons that cross-cut between a Stephen Harper press conference (monologues are more interesting from villains than heroes) and Raj being interrogated (see previous chapter for the first of them).

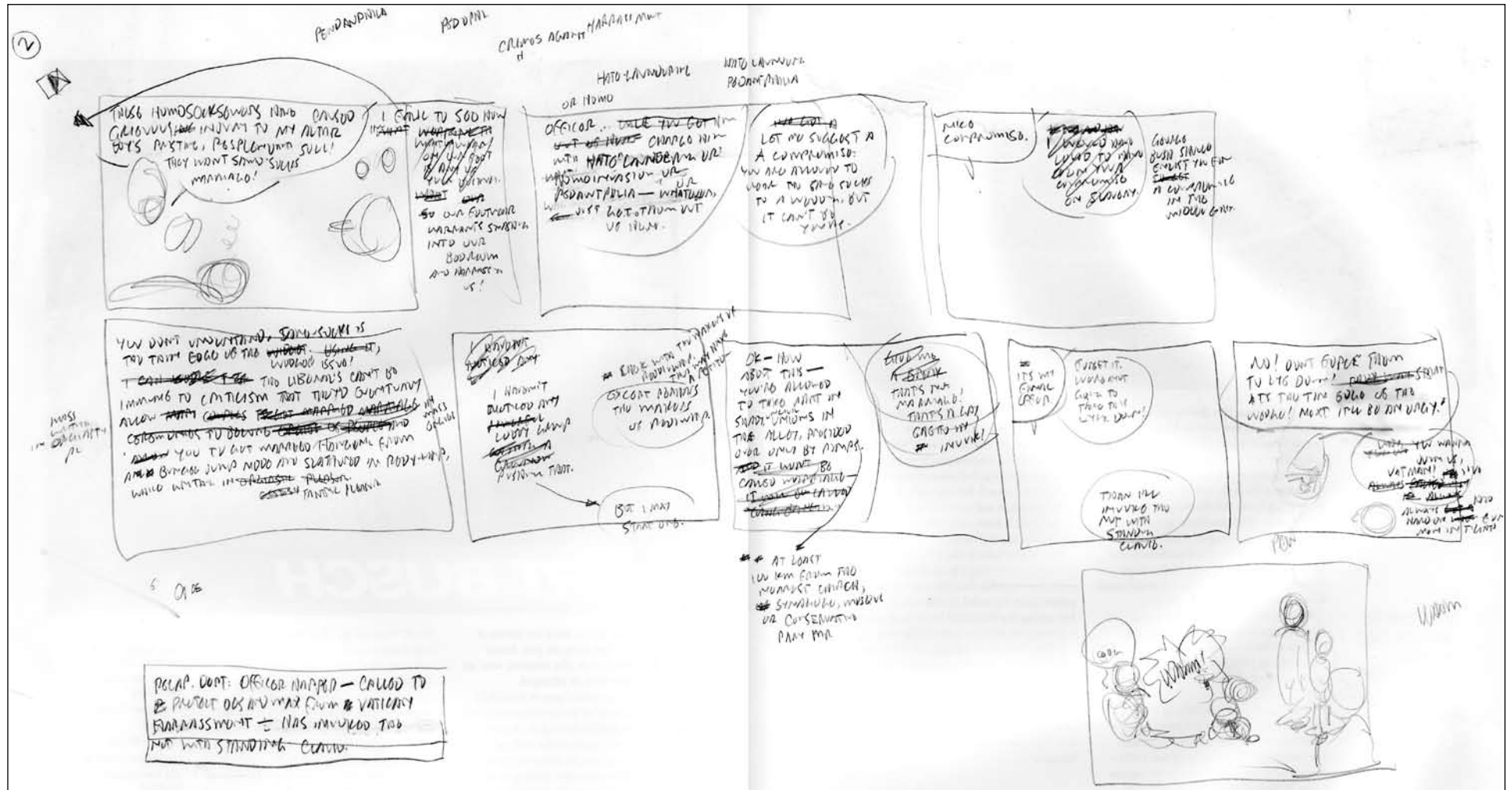
Comics is about dialogue. If a monologue can be converted to a dialogue, there are more opportunities for drama and character development.



## Take an idea to its extreme

Probe it. Explore it. Take “what-if” writing exercises. Worry about structure later. Allow yourself time – both to exercise free-flowing thought experiments and later to rearrange and edit the results. Editing is an integral part of the creative process, but can stifle you if it is used at the outset.

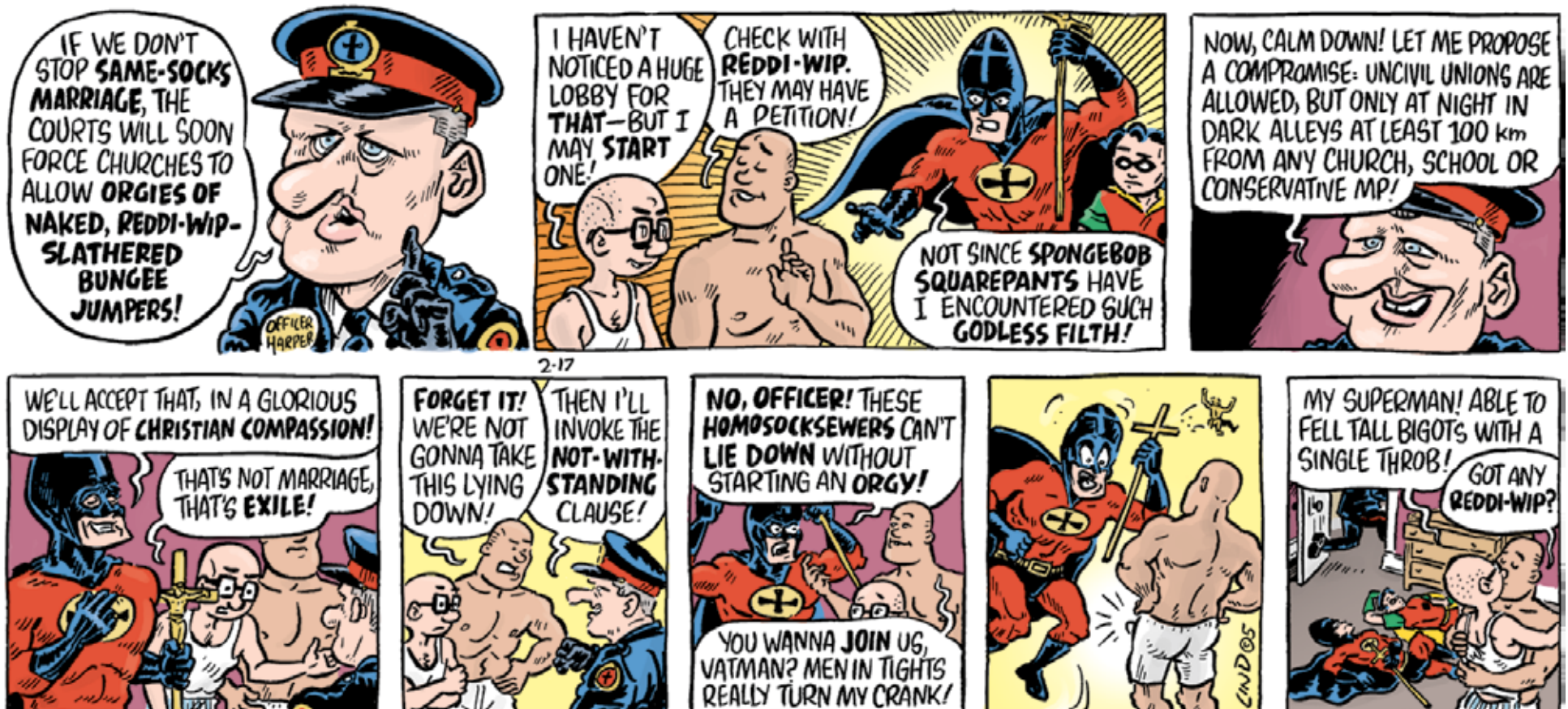
In this example, the phrase “same-socks marriage” came to me while pushing my daughter in a stroller to the market. It allowed me a totally silly framework upon which to satirize the Vatican’s totally silly objections to same-sex marriage. Below is one of the several tabloid-sized sheets of scribbles that went into creating the finished cartoon series.



## Take an idea to its extreme (2)

Note (if you can read any of my barely legible scribbles on the previous page) that I started this, the third cartoon in the series, at the halfway point in the original draft. Finding the right starting point is often a challenge. My ideal is one that establishes the scenario, leads in the reader and provides an initial punch line – all of which are, I think, achieved here.

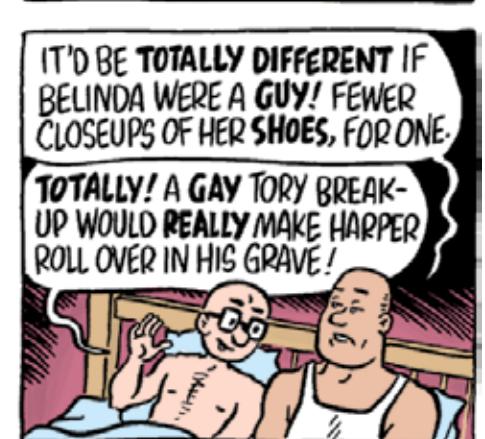
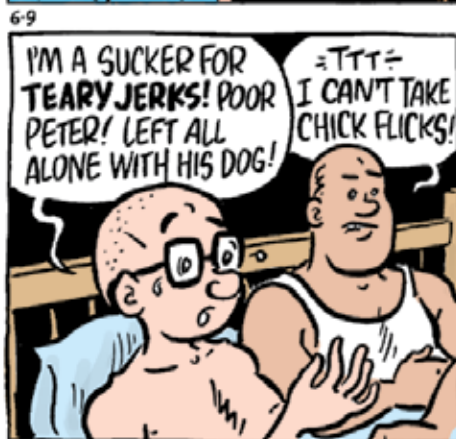
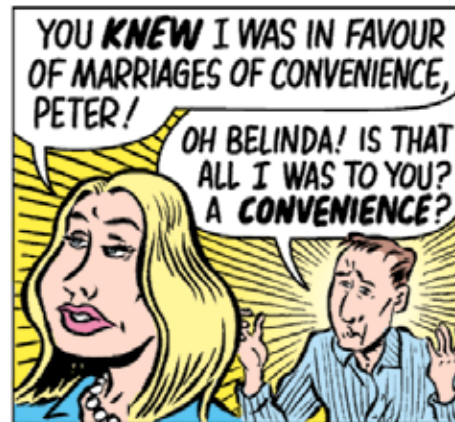
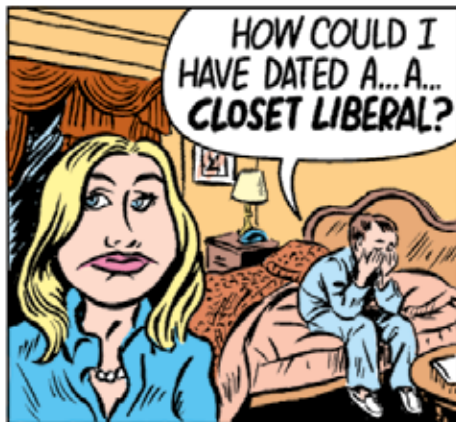
Note also that I've gone way beyond the initial "same-socks marriage" pun that sparked this series of three. The final "Superman" punch line came to me at the very end of the creative process, as I was starting to get desperate – and contrasts with the Vatican superheroes. You might have noticed, I'm pretty fond of this cartoon.



## Explore your characters

When I originally wrote this, it was Horst and Celia in bed commenting on the Stronach/MacKay breakup. But I arrived at a dead end. I couldn't think of a punch line. Then, when I experimented with putting Max and Des in bed, it worked. Something about the soap operaesque, tear-jerking qualities of the story worked better with a gay couple – and added humour because of Harper's anti-gay marriage policies.

Note also that I adopted a different style of lettering (on the computer rather than with pen and ink) and drawing (with a brush rather than a crow quill) for the first three panels, in order to simulate romance comics.



## Stay focused

In this cartoon, I wanted Harper to refer to the AIDS conference that he avoided. I did so as an aside (second row, first panel), but it distracted from the flow and main topic, which was Raj being held by the Americans in Afghanistan. I replaced Harper's speech balloon with one by Donya, which gives a little more background as to her family's plight and generates sympathy for her character.

Sometimes I am able to generate a whole cartoon from a detour that has ended up on the cutting-room floor.



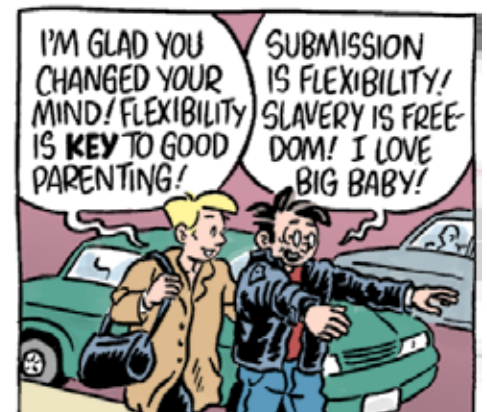
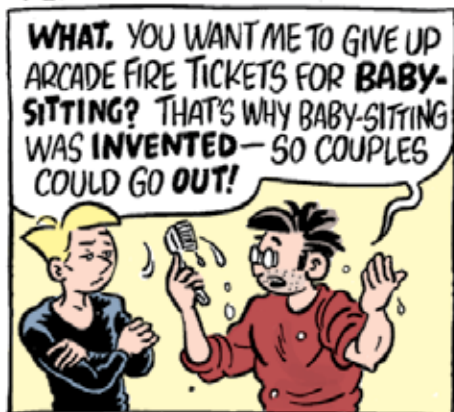
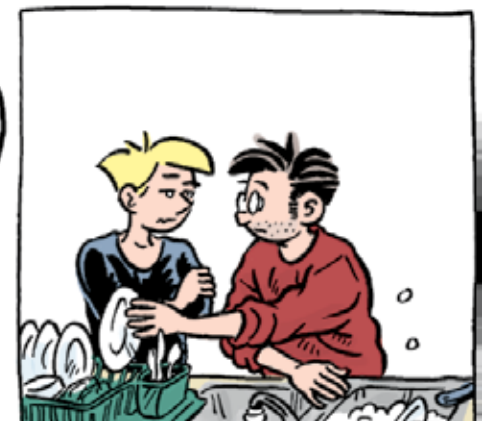
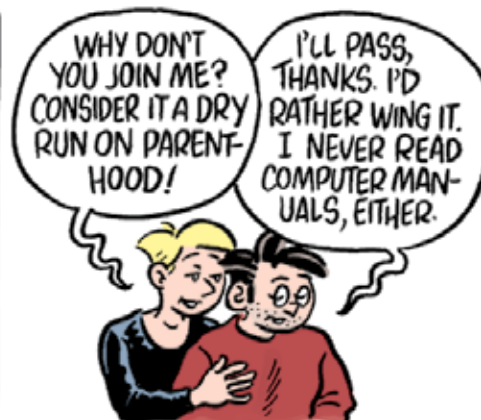
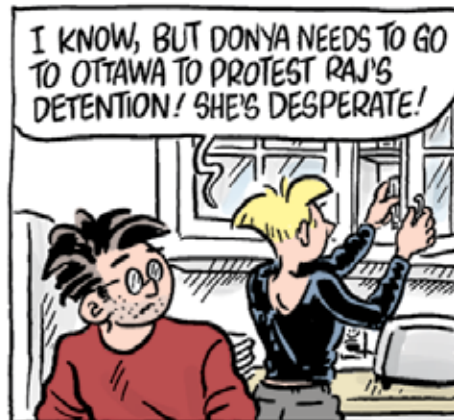
The replacement panel for the shaded panel 5.

## Allow pauses

Use pauses as character double-takes or simply as punctuation. It helps the rhythm and sometimes accentuates humour or dramatic tension. A panel without dialogue can sometimes say more than any balloon if the characters' facial expressions are right.



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Blogging software makes publishing on the Web relatively easy and it offers valuable tools for archiving and organizing cartoons. Through the use of categories or tags, you can allow readers to sort your strips by theme or character. This way, the reader can look over all cartoons in the “prisoner Raj” saga and trace the plotline. My site was designed by myself but implemented by a friend of mine using Moveable Type.

## Archives page with categories at left

Click on any of the categories and descriptions of those comics are displayed on the right.



## Further reading

This handout is a cursory look at comics from my perspective. For much more, I'd recommend:

*Understanding Comics* by Scott Mccloud

*Comics and Sequential Art* by Will Eisner

*Story: Substance, Structure, Style and The Principles of Screenwriting* by Robert McKee

## Graphic novels

This is just a short list, off the top of my head.

*Dykes to Watch Out For* by Alison Bechtel is about the only other comic strip that does something like what I do on a weekly basis. Many of her strips have been collected in books. She also has a just-published graphic novel, *Fun Home*.

*Blankets* by Craig Thompson

Read as many graphic novels and comics as you can.

## Comics that have influenced me

Doonesbury by Gary Trudeau

Tintin by Hergé

Washingtoons by Mark Allan Stamaty

Calvin and Hobbes by Bill Watterson

All the classics (Peanuts, BC, etc.) and Marvel

And many more that will come to me after I print this off.