

An Introduction to Manga

漫画 Key Questions

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1. What is Manga?

In Japan, Manga means comics/graphic novels/sequential art in general. However, comics made in non-East Asian countries, such as Marvel and DC comics are not called “Manga” in Japan. Most Japanese people call these “comics”. This is not only because of the distinctive differences in drawing/story-telling styles, but also because Manga is often thought of as graphic novels written in Japan for a Japanese readership.

However, even though many Japanese people think of “made in Japan” comics when they hear the word “Manga”, today Manga is a global phenomenon, produced in many different languages and by different people. This means that the term “Manga” is also used for graphic novels with a style clearly influenced by Manga.

2. What does the word “Manga” mean?



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The word “Manga” was first used to describe an action of “drawing whatever one wishes”; the two characters “Man” 漫 and “ga” 画 literally mean “drawings of various sorts” or “unbounded pictures.” Its origins can be found in the “illustrated essays” of the Edo period (1603-1868), such as *The Hokusai Manga* by Katsushika Hokusai. This work may be thought of as a distant relative, but not a direct predecessor of modern Manga.

Manga took on the form that we recognise today when the word was used in the Meiji Period (1868-1912) as a translation for the English words “comic”, “caricature” and “cartoon”; but Japanese people only started to use the word “Manga” widely after the start of the Showa period (1926-89).

3. When did Manga first start to be produced?

As mentioned above, in the Meiji period, the word “Manga” started to be used for comics/cartoons/caricatures. At the same time, other styles such as “funny stories with pictures” were also referred to with the term “Manga”. As a result, humorous old scroll drawings, such as *Chōjū Jinbutsu Giga* are often said to be the oldest examples of Manga. This is not necessarily incorrect, but it is important to not consider these scroll drawings as the direct ancestor of Manga.

Modern Manga, with well-developed plot, artwork, paneling and speech/text (and onomatopoeia), originated in the early 20th century. In the 1950s and 1960s, Manga had its big boom. The genre widened, and specialised and serialised Manga magazines were gradually mass produced.

Animals bathing and swimming scene from Chōjū Jinbutsu Giga 1st scroll (12th-13th century)



4. What are the key elements of “Manga style”?

It is extremely difficult to define Manga. Creating a definition with reference to a particular drawing/story-telling style is almost impossible.

However, there are a few key elements which are common to Manga:

- i. **Rich use of a variety of speech bubbles** (in response to a characters’ emotion/action). The amount of text used is an important consideration. Works of Manga that explain the characters thoughts/feelings verbally are often criticised (but sometimes, in certain Manga, such as *Death Note*, the heavy reliance on text is a deliberate stylistic choice).
- ii. **Dynamic paneling and camera angles** (not all the time but very often in response to a character’s emotion/action in order to enhance the atmosphere). Western-style comics quite often have a fixed-point camera and/or camera angle (and paneling) which follows only what is happening in the scene.
- iii. **Unique ways for how to and how not to use backgrounds.** In Western-style comics, the background is drawn with a lot of details in almost every panel. In Manga, the background is not always that detailed. However, if the background in Manga is always minimal, then some may criticise the work for focusing too much on the characters’ emotions,etc. There are basically three different background styles: to describe where the character is; to show a character’s feeling (some abstract images and/or symbols, such as dark shadowy patterns and flashes); and to describe the speed/impact of a character’s action (e.g. speed lines). Every time a scene changes, it is advisable to add at least one panel with a reasonably detailed background image to show where the character is. Also, you can omit the background when there is something more important to highlight, such as a character’s facial expression.

- iv. **Facial expressions.** Drawing characters with exaggerated facial expressions makes good impact, but sometimes subtle facial expressions are more important.

In terms of drawing styles, it is important to remember that there are many variations, so it is very difficult to say what makes the ultimate “Manga-style” drawing, but what is common is that images are often not photo-realistic. How human figures etc. are drawn depends on the unique interpretation by each *Manga-ka* (Manga artist). Often, lines are used quite economically and efficiently (e.g. Manga artists tend not to draw out creases on clothes, but only pick up a few distinctive lines to add in).

5. How is Manga created (from design to print)?

- i. **Planning and character design:** some Manga artists write full scripts to begin with, but some start with rough ideas of dialogues and character designs, then shape them up while doing thumbnail illustrations. Unlike Marvel or DC, most Manga are the creation of a single person. They write stories, design characters, draw everything, including the speech bubbles (text is added later by publishers), and create colour pages. Some of the most in-demand Manga artists hire helpers, but they are typically seen as “assistants” rather than “collaborators”.

In Japan, if a Manga story/series is created for a serial magazine or publisher, the artist teams up with an editor, who plays some very important roles. Thus, many popular Manga works are, effectively, collaborations between the artist and their editor. Good editors give the artist a lot of advice, help with research, and encourage the artist when s/he is having difficulty meeting deadlines or struggling with the planning, for example. The artist and the editor have many discussions about the work from the initial stage throughout the entire production process.

- ii. **Storyboarding:** the making of small rough sketches and planning for each page is called “Name” in Japan. Manga artists submit thumbnails to their editor and publisher, and if they are approved, they can proceed to the next stage.
- iii. **Detailed rough sketches:** this is where more precise sketches are drawn before inking.
- iv. **Inking:** many artists still do this with pen and paper, but some do it digitally.
- v. **Toning:** using “screen tone” to add shadows and textures. You can buy a lot of different types of screen tones, which are a kind of thin, transparent sticker with some dotted patterns printed on it. You cut it into your desired shape and stick it over the inked page. Nowadays many people do this process digitally even if they ink in the traditional way.

In the traditional method, speech bubbles are incorporated in the images at the drawing stage, and all text is hand written on a separate sheet of transparent paper, which is attached to each of the speech bubbles afterwards, so that the editor can do the typesetting after the work is submitted. If the Manga is created for a magazine, the editorial team will do some work, such as deciding the order of the stories/series inside the issue.

- vi. **Printing and delivery:** to bookshops, kiosks, convenience stores and the other shops.

6. How do you read Manga?

When reading Manga, there are a few things to be aware of:

- 1) **Direction of reading:** in Japanese books, the text is traditionally read from right to left. So, in Manga written in Japanese, you follow the flow of paneling from right to left and follow speech bubbles from left to right within the panel flow; but, many Manga produced for Western audiences today tend to follow the left-to-right convention. For example, *Astro Boy (Tetsuwan Atomu)* by the legendary Osamu Tezuka was flipped to the left-to-right convention when it was first imported into America. This, however, meant that most characters became left-handed.
- 2) **Medium:** most Manga stories and series are first published in magazines (mainly story Manga) or newspapers (mainly 4-panel Manga and caricature-style ones). There are more than 300 specialised Manga magazines published in Japan (including some magazines that are sporadically printed). Some Manga magazines are very specifically themed, including those aimed at adults.

The popular magazines contain many Manga series. For example, the best-selling weekly Manga magazine is called *Weekly Jump*, which sells approximately 1,800,000 copies every Monday, and contains around 10-15 different stories/series. As you might have seen, these magazines are printed on cheap paper (that is why most Manga are drawn in black and white). Whenever a popular series featured in a magazine reaches approximately 10 episodes, they are collected and published as a stand-alone book, sometimes with bonus chapters drawn by the Manga artist. These books are smaller in size than the magazines and printed on better quality paper.

Nowadays, most popular magazines have a digital version so that readers can read the latest issue and back numbers online. There are also digital Manga websites and apps where you can buy not only digitized existing Manga books and episodes, but also many original Manga stories especially created for those platforms.

7. What types of Manga are there?

Manga have traditionally been divided into several different categories divided by target gender and age group, but nowadays these sharp classifications are falling out of fashion so the boundaries between them are blurring. When selecting Manga for students though, it is important to be aware of these categories, as some Manga may contain themes unsuitable for those aged under 18.

The most common categories are:

- **Shojo** Manga: usually for girls, mainly aged around 10 years old up to young adults. The artistic style is “cute”, delicate, and full of emotions. See: *Vampire Knights* and *Fruits Basket*.
- **Shonen** Manga: usually for boys of a similar age group as *Shojo* Manga. The style is usually less cute and inked lines are hard, full of actions and speed, e.g. *Naruto* and *Attack on Titan*.
- **Josei** Manga: for adult female readers. Its style is often more realistic than *Shojo* Manga, but also quite varied. *Josei* Manga often deals with more adult themes and human drama.
- **Seinen** Manga: for adult male readers. Its style is often more realistic and detailed than *Shonen* Manga. **Gekiga** Manga is for older, mainly male readers. The artistic style can be similar to *Seinen* Manga, but some of them are drawn in more alternative styles.

It is important to remember however that there are many Manga which cannot be categorised into any of these groups. Even though people still use these terms to define different genres, readers these days tend to choose what they read more freely, and there are many Manga works that are difficult to categorise. This may reflect the fact that there are more female Manga artists now, many of whom publish work for *Shonen* and *Seinen* Manga magazines.

8. What important things do you need to consider when designing a Manga character?

The first key thing is to establish **who** the character is; this means that when you design a character, it is always good to consider carefully their personality and life story. Try to imagine all the tiny details, such as what their favorite food is, what kind of weather they like/dislike, what it is about the character that makes them interesting. When you are making up all the details, you also need to think about the reasoning behind. For example, if you decide that your character hates rainy days, you must also come up with a reason for this. You do not have to decide every detail before you start drawing, but from time to time you should add that kind of detail to your character as you progress.

When designing the appearance of characters, remember that the main character should stand out from the other characters in some way. Also, it is important to carefully plan how the nature of a

character relates to their appearance. For example, if you decide the character is shy, you have to think how to reflect this in the way they dress themselves; and if their costume does not obviously reflect this characteristic, then the reason why should also be considered. This process will not only make characters have more depth, but also helps to develop the story.

9. What are the differences in the production of Manga and Graphic novels?

As noted above, the most common Manga format in Japan is serialised magazines. These magazines may be weekly, bi-weekly or often monthly, and each issue contains one new episode of maybe five, seven, or even ten series drawn by different artists. Because of this short turnaround, the entire production is streamlined, and Manga artists for big magazines no longer draw everything on their own; in fact, they may only do the outline, and the inking and background etc. may be done by the assistants. Manga in Japan are traditionally printed in black and white as the cost of production would be high to produce if in colour.

Graphic novels, however, are not often serialised (and if they are this is not usually every month nor in magazine form). Instead, they are sometimes fully coloured and come out in book form. There is no common and established system of delegating a part of the drawing work to assistants. Graphic novels also tend to have sophisticated themes and give off a more literary feel (they are after all called “novels”) than Manga which in Japan is part of popular culture.¹

¹ It is important to note that some artists, such as Fumio Obata who is based in the UK, produce what might be termed graphic novels as well (e.g. *Just So Happens*). However, he is still regarded as a *Manga-ka* (Manga artist), which goes to show that Manga has the ability to accommodate a broad range of styles and publication methods as well.