How to Show Complex Emotions in your Art

Here comic artist and illustrator Tom Humberstone shares the techniques and approaches he uses to add depth to the emotions shown on the faces of his characters. He's given you overall tips – plus an in-depth look at the illustration he created for our feature on how to price illustration work.

Illustration vs comics

The key question I think about when trying to convey emotions/expressions in my art is what is the intended resting place of the piece? I switch between illustration commissions and comics a fair amount and both require a different approach. When it comes to comics, your style will make a lot of decisions for you. How one chooses to draw eyes and other facial features will inevitably have an impact on conveying emotions.

In these early panels of a comic for *The Nib* (below), I decided to use dots for eyes for the characters – leaving the expressive heavy-lifting to the eyebrows and mouth. That's not uncommon though – pull a few faces in the mirror and you'll realise pretty quickly that your eyebrows are doing most of the work when it comes to communicating emotion.

It's in the eyes

In comics, choosing how you draw eyes – and then breaking the rules you set up – can impart information to the reader extremely efficiently. In this comic about Einstein (below), I generally draw eyes as you might expect – a full shape with the white of the eye, the iris and the pupil. But when I wanted to show a character as being shocked or surprised, I

switched to using dots for eyes.

It’s a subtle detail but hopefully one that the reader subconsciously internalises. It’s also worth noting the use of emanata on this page (lines or symbols emanating from characters/objects) which is another handy shortcut to conveying emotion in comics – and something I wouldn’t use in an illustration.

Show or tell

The important thing to remember in comics is that you’re trying to communicate the story in the most efficient manner possible. So communicating emotions successfully in the art hopefully means you’ll not need to explain it in the text,

allowing the words to work their own magic. A successful comic is one that avoids duplication through showing *and* telling.

Pick your approach to likenesses

When it comes to illustration commissions, you'll often be called on to draw real people and, obviously, likenesses are important. Everyone has their own approach to likenesses and how they fit within their own style and you'll no doubt have yours.

My rule for myself is that I can't avoid photo reference, but I'll try and only use it in the pencilling stage. If I'm happy with the pencils, I'll close that tab or put the photo in a drawer and do the lineart without any guide – the hope being

that I retain a bit of personality and dynamism to the piece. I was particularly happy with how this portrait of *A Fantastic Woman*‘s Daniela Vega for *Little White Lies* turned out.

Creating iconic figures

Sometimes, as in this case, I want the image to be less fluid and more static. I was comfortable with losing a bit of dynamism here so that I could achieve a more iconic look for Serena Williams. I was aiming for a more vector-based look to the illustration. I actually don’t like working with vectors so this was all drawn by hand and converted to a bitmap so I could colour the lineart the same as the background colours.

Showing emotion through colour

Another key to communicating emotions is the use of colour. For this piece (below) about echoism and narcissistic abuse for *Broadly*, I wanted the echoist to be blending into the background and almost disappearing – a palette of turquoise sea blues felt appropriate, leaving a mix of fiery reds and oranges for the foreground narcissists.

Take a good hard look at yourself

On the subject of narcissism, it’s probably worth pointing out that I will spend a lot of time looking at myself in the mirror/taking photos of myself when working on expressions.

Look through any artist’s photos and you’ll likely come across some bizarre posed selfie reference. For this piece about former friends and tech partners, I wanted to draw them arguing but had to thread the needle between maintaining their likenesses and conveying the emotions. Naturally, there were a lot of aggressive-looking photos of me on my phone that week.

In-depth: How Tom illustrated How To Price Your Illustration Work

We commissioned Tom to illustrate our feature on the challenges around pricing. Here he takes us step-by-step through his creative process for the work.

Step 1: Roughs

I start all commissions with one or two rough concepts that I send over to the client (below). If I have a variety of options, I like to see whether the client has a preferred direction they would like me to pursue. If I feel confident in the idea, I’ll generally send a fairly detailed design like this.

Step 2: Colour rough

Sometimes, if I have the time and I’m working with a new client, I’ll try to provide a rough idea of the colour scheme I have in mind (below) – being careful to point out that this may not be the final palette I settle on. It usually helps the client picture the final illustration and can help sell the concept.

While this step isn’t necessary, I try to do it for most projects as I often discover problems with the colour scheme that I can avoid later in the process.

Step 3: Linework

Once the rough is signed off by the client and I’m given the all clear, I’ll make a start on the line art. Using the rough pencils as a guideline. If the deadline isn’t too tight, I’ll usually do this step by hand – using brush and ink on Bristol Board. In this case, I drew the line art digitally on a 13-inch Cintiq.

For a piece like this which involves several characters on different planes, I’ll separate elements across a few layers. It allows for easy editing further down the line – if required – and can give me options when it comes to composition.

Step 4: Block colours

When the lineart is finished, I’ll block in some flat colours. This is usually where I’ll start playing around with any colour scheme changes I think are needed.

Step 5: Shading and detail

Once I’ve flattened the colours, I can easily select parts of the illustration I want to work on. At this point, I’ll usually start working on shading and other detailing but I don’t have a single approach to this – each illustration is different.

For this piece, I added a layer of purple shadows which I then reduced the opacity to 30% and set the blending mode to Multiply. I then added a layer of blue light sources – often for monitor glare or to suggest the brightness of the text that will be added later. I then set this layer’s blending mode to Overlay.

Step 6: More detail

With the majority of the illustration finished I’ll start colouring the lineart and adding gradients and other details where needed.

Step 7: Hand-drawn lettering

At this point, I started working on the text elements, hand drawing them on another layer.

Step 8: Colouring the letters

My initial version of the illustration wasn’t quite working for me – the text didn’t stand out as much as I was hoping. The balance felt off. I spent hours fiddling with the colours of the text and changing the background colours but to no avail.

Step 9: Fixing the legibility

Eventually, I realised that adding a thin outline to the text fixed the issues I was having without disrupting the illustration or requiring a massive rethink of the colours. Once I was happy, I added a subtle paper texture (a scanned watercolour wash I have on file with the curves whacked up), and then tweaked the overall saturation a little.

Tom Humberstone

Tom Humberstone is an award-winning comic artist and illustrator based in Edinburgh. He’s a regular contributor to *The Nib*, *Vox* and *Cartoon Movement* and former political cartoonist for the *New Statesman*. He’s self-published of a variety of comics including *Art School Scum*, 24-hour

comic *Everything You Never Wanted To Know About Crohns Disease*, and the illustrated reportage book *My Fellow Americans* (co-authored with journalist Dan Hancox).

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