

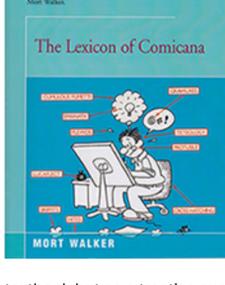
Quimps, Plewds, And Grawlives: The Secret Language Of Comic Strips

You've probably never heard of a blurgit or a swallowp or a grawlix or an agitron, but you see them every day in your newspaper's comics section. Here's a primer on the secret language of comic symbols.

When you think about it, the real world doesn't have much to do with your favorite newspaper's comic section.

If you were a cartoon character, canaries would erupt from your cracked skull and fly around in circles every time you hit your head. When you swore, your curse words would censor themselves as a long, seemingly random series of nonverbal iconography. If you didn't bathe, visible smell waves would waft off of you. And every time you said anything, it would result in words actually burbling up to hang in a cloud above you.

That's not what happens in real life, obviously. But if you look beyond the simple linework and frozen-in-time gags, the comics section is really the part of every newspaper that is dedicated to the language of cartoon symbology. In both importance and scope, there's a lot more to the design of the comics section than you might realize.



In 1980, Mort Walker—the creator of comic strips like *Beetle Bailey* and *Hi and Lois*—published a charming book titled *The Lexicon of Comicana*. Barely 96 pages, mostly cartoons and white space, *The Lexicon* was Walker's own silly attempt to classify the symbols used in comic strips around the world. But the book ended up doing far more than that.

To this day, it's studied in art schools around the world, not just as a textbook but as a treatise explaining why the funnies matter.

Born in 1923 in Kansas City, Missouri, Mort Walker has been an insanely prolific cartoonist for almost 75 years. He had his first comic gag published at the age of 11. By 14, Walker was a pro cartoonist, selling gag cartoons to a number of boy-friendly pulps like *Flying Aces* and *Inside Detective*. By 15, he was cranking out a weekly strip for the *Kansas City Journal*; by 18, he was the chief editorial designer for Hallmark Cards. And this is just what Walker accomplished before he created his most famous comic creation, *Beetle Bailey*, in 1950.

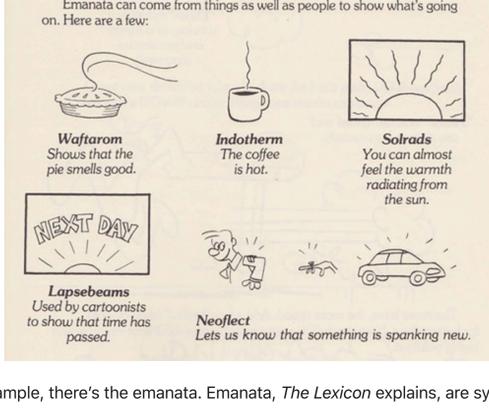


If you asked Walker, he'd probably say there was nothing special about him being so precocious at such a young age. "Every child is a cartoonist," he writes in *The Lexicon*. "We all begin by drawing crude symbols of people and houses and trees. No one ever starts out as a Rembrandt. But Rembrandt started out as a cartoonist."

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Walker might joke that what made him so wonderfully suited to being a career cartoonist is the fact that he never grew up. Even today, at 89, Walker makes his living by "drawing crude symbols" of people, and houses, and things. Not a lot of people would claim that *Beetle Bailey* and *Hi and Lois* are sophisticated examples of the cartooning art. But they are, and after reading *The Lexicon*, it's almost impossible not to have an almost idolatrous appreciation for Walker's comic strips, when before they might have seemed clichéd and woefully behind the times.

As a reader, *The Lexicon of Comicana's* principal charm is that it lays out a series of cartooning phenomena that you've probably never thought too hard about, gives them funny, onomatopoeic names, and then lays out examples of how your favorite comic strip might use them.



For example, there's the emanata. Emanata, *The Lexicon* explains, are symbols that emanate outwards from cartoon characters to show their internal state. Many emanata are unclassified by Walker (for example, hearts bubbling out of a character's head to show that he's fallen in love), but of the varieties identified by *The Lexicon*, there are some real winners.

If you've ever read *Cathy* or a Japanese manga, you'll already be familiar with plewds, the drops of sweat that spray outwards from a cartoon character under emotional distress. The more plewds a character has, the more upset he or she is: There's a big difference between the two plewds a comic strip character might show if he ripped the backside off his trousers and the eight he might have if he was skydived naked into the middle of a conference of clergymen.

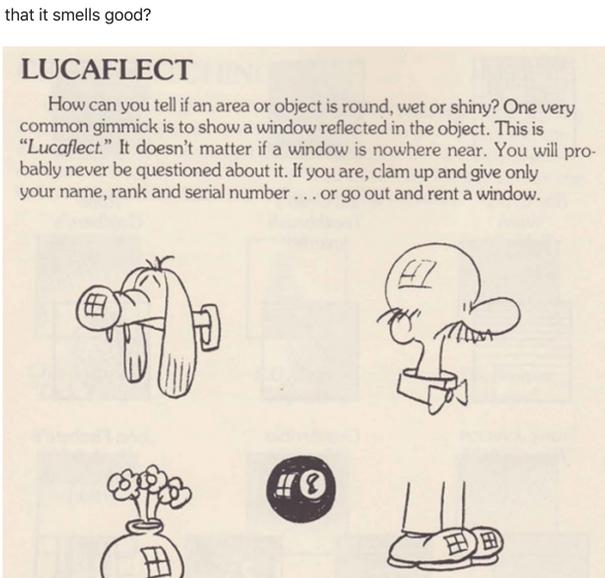
If you like to tie one on, *The Lexicon* can afford you a useful grammar of cartoon drunkenness. If Leroy Lockhorn stumbles home with just a couple of tiny squeans above his head in the comics, he's unlikely to get walloped: he's just a little bit tipsy. If that squean is accompanied by a spurl, though, he's loaded, and Loretta's likely to bring a rolling pin down on his head. (As a personal note, after reading *The Lexicon* for the first time, I adopted the words "squeanish" and "spurlish" to describe my own relative state of inebriation. They're very useful.)



In a section of the book devoted to lines cartoonists use to show motion, Walker coins some more great terminologies. For example, any line used to show something moving is called a sphericasia. Shake something hard enough and these lines are called agitrons, while the lines that show which way a comic strip character is pointing are called digitrons. And when Sarge punches Beetle Bailey in the comics, the punch is made up of three distinct elements: A little dust cloud called a briffit to show where the punch started, a swallowp to show the arc of the fist as it smashes across Beetle's jaw, and the terminating point at the end, which is a whitope.

Speaking of briffits, they are most often found in the comic strips in the accompaniment of hites: horizontal lines streaking between a cartoon character and his briffit to represent speed. "The more hites, the more speed," Walker explains. But there are also vites and dites. As their names imply, these are vertical and diagonal hites, but they don't show speed. Instead, they show that an object is reflective. There are also uphites and downhites, which come out of a character when he is jumping or falling.

A related line species to the vite is the solrad, which is a line emanating from an object to show that something—like a lightbulb or the sun—is bright. The solrad is similar but not identical to the neoflect, which are the lines that bounce away from something like a diamond ring or automobile in a comic strip to show us that it's brand new. There's also the indotherm, a squiggly line that might drift out of a cup of coffee to show that it's hot. Or how about the delightfully named waftatron, which is the wisp of steam that comes from a cartoon pie to show that it smells good?



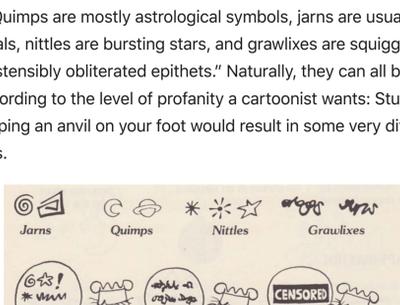
The Lexicon also will draw your attention to some surreal examples of comic strip symbology that you probably never noticed before. For example, have you ever heard of a lucafect? Whether a door knob, a freshly shined pair of shoes, or a bald head, the lucafect is the symbol cartoonists use to show something is round, wet, or shiny. What's really curious about the lucafect, though, is that it's usually drawn as a four-pane window reflected in the object. Quips Walker: "It doesn't matter if a window is nowhere near. You will probably never be questioned about it. If you are, clam up and only give your rank, name and serial number. . . or go out and rent a window."

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There's even a science to word balloons. Walker likes to refer to them as *fumetti*, which is Italian for "balloon." There are many different types of *fumetti*, though. For example, there's the regular word "balloon," which is meant to convey something being said in a normal speaking voice. But what if Snoopy is the one talking? Well, Snoopy can't talk, of course—that would be absurd—but he can have an internal monologue using a cumulus *fumetti*, which allows the reader to hear his thoughts.

What if your favorite comic strip character is on the phone? Then you use the "AT&T *fumetti*"—visually, a sort of middle-y, crackly word balloon with fuzzily scrawled words hovering in the middle—to show the voice is being relayed electronically. There are other types of word balloons, too. "The Frigidaire *fumetti*," writes Walker, "conveys a cold-shouldered snub," and is principally illustrated by showing actual icicles hanging off the balloon. But for yelling, you use the "Boom!" *fumetti*, where the edges of the balloon are drawn in spikes. "The volume is determined by the size of the serrations," *The Lexicon* explains.

Comics even have their own fascinating symbology for obscenity. "Even in today's permissive society many four letter words are not permissible in the comics," Walker wryly explains. Comic characters, therefore, are expected to self-censor themselves by speaking in the bizarre iconography of maladicta. The maladicta is made up of jarns, quimps, nittles, and grawlives. What's the difference? Quimps are mostly astrological symbols, jarns are usually different types of spirals, nittles are bursting stars, and grawlives are squiggly lines that represent "ostensibly obliterated epithets." Naturally, they can all be mixed and matched according to the level of profanity a cartoonist wants: Stubbing your toe and dropping an anvil on your foot would result in some very different combinations.



This is a lot of fun, of course, and at the end of the day, the grammar, taxonomy, and classification of cartoon symbols with which *The Lexicon of Comicana* concerns itself might seem like a bunch of tongue-in-cheek silliness. That's because it is! After all, Walker was a born cartoonist, and he has spent his entire life trying to get people to crack a small smile every day when open their newspapers.

But something can be silly and still be important. To Walker, understanding the design language of the comics was important. Cartooning is usually one of the first means of written expression a child learns, and for Walker, understanding the language of cartooning was the key to communicating with other people in an increasingly international world.

"Cartoon symbols are being used more and more throughout the world to bridge international language behaviors," Walker writes. "The more international we become, the more we need symbols and the more important it becomes that they are universally understood... We must take heart, then, when we see people in remote parts of the Earth reading *Blondie* and *Peanuts* and *Donald Duck*. Not only are they being entertained but they are educating themselves in the world language of symbols."

The Lexicon of Comicana is still in print and [available on Amazon for \\$14.95](#).