

Deconstructing an illustration

Some key ingredients for creating impact

By Kagan McLeod *The National Post*

Newspaper deadlines are always tight, but the sooner you assign an illustration the more time you'll have to make something turn out great. Most illustrators are procrastinators (or are busy working on earlier deadlines) so if you can afford some padding in your deadline it could prevent a disaster. *Here are steps to create an impactful illustration, and how to assign one:*

Assigning: You shouldn't assign an illustration because you can't find a picture. You should assign an illustration when the idea in an article is more abstract than literal. Aside from portraiture, where an artist isn't always concerned with concepts (though it can work nicely in portraiture, too), or information illustration, where something is portrayed literally, illustration can be very conceptual. This is where you can use the space to add depth to the story or idea, not just accompany it. I've attempted to show music, something non-visual, in this picture. In context I think it makes sense even though it's not shown with the symbols people usually associate with music, like music notes or piano keys.

Quick read: Most times the illustration will be read before the article, so it's important that its message is clear. One mistake illustrators and editors tend to make is to try to illustrate all of a story's points at once, which hardly ever works. The reader should be intrigued enough to read on, not satisfied with a visual retelling of the story. For this piece on musicians and Internet piracy, I wanted to show technology as a means to get your music to "blow up" and be heard everywhere. All you need to know from looking at this piece is that it involves music and computers, and that there's something aggressive happening between the two.

Support: The headline and deck should clarify the reader's interpretations of an illustration, and not complicate them. A colleague of mine, Richard Johnson, once illustrated a business story using a can of worms as a metaphor for a new problem a company was facing. Unfortunately the headline that ran with the piece ended up saying that the company was "In the Line of Fire". Not only did it not support the metaphor in the accompanying illustration, it suggested a completely different one. If you've got a headline or angle in mind before an illustration is assigned, it's helpful to pass it along to the illustrator. Sometimes a metaphor or concept can be too complex or obscure, so don't be afraid to reign in your illustrator if it's falling too far off the mark, either.

Make it pop: Almost every time I hand in a rough drawing I'm asked to make sure the final is colorful. Of course this doesn't mean every piece should be neon, or a rainbow; a limited palette can suggest a mood to go with the article and looks hip as well. When a publication is paying for four plates, they should be used to set the tone for the message of the story.



Layout: In a newspaper there's often more room available than other print mediums, so there should be plenty of opportunities to do great things with the space. Working together with the illustrator on the layout can be helpful when you want to break out of the standard ruled box. A rough pdf of the layout can inspire the illustrator to push his or her work further, and help them make choices for size and placement of the picture's elements.

Time: With technology, illustrators can work a lot faster than they ever could, but editors are all the more demanding with the immediacy of the Internet and e-mail. Neither party has the advantage.

Kagan McLeod has been illustrating for The National Post since 1999. His work also appears frequently in U.S. publications such as Entertainment Weekly, Men's Health, Condé Nast Portfolio and New York Magazine.