

Ideograms in Comics

Because comics are a visual form of storytelling, comic-book language involves both text and illustrations. Some graphic symbols have become codified so that readers know they stand for a specific idea or concept; they're known as ideograms. Here is a list of some of the best-known ones:

Light Bulbs

A light bulb over a character's head means they just had an "illumination," i.e. a sudden idea or revelation.



Stars and Lightning Bolts

Stars and/or bolts of lightning stand for pain. Placed near a character's knee or elbow, they mean the character has been hurt or wounded. Placed over a character's head, they stand for a severe headache, and often imply that the character is having trouble finding a solution to a problem.



Battle Clouds

A cloud of dust with punching fists, kicking feet and stars of pain poking out of it is used to portray a fight or battle between two or more characters.



Anger Veins

A vein appearing on a character's scalp or temple stands for anger. A manga-style, exaggeratedly large vein tips the situation towards comedy.



N.B.: This ideogram can appear on other parts of characters' bodies, particularly on their fist. In that case, it means they want to hit someone.

Drops of Embarrassment

This swollen drop of sweat symbolizes shame, embarrassment, awkwardness, stress or any other form of discomfort. It's generally placed on the temple. The bigger and more swollen it is, the funnier the embarrassment is meant to be.



Depression Lines

These parallel lines mean that the character feels crushed and on the verge of despair.



Action Lines and Wakes

Action lines indicate movement and speed.



Insults

To create a comic effect, a misshapen speech bubble containing images of anger and confusion stands for rude, insulting dialogue.



It is perfectly possible to modulate ideograms' meanings by varying their effects. If a character is smiling while an anger vein is showing on their temple, that means that they are forcing themselves to seem happy. Other commonly used examples include: a heart to stand for love, pink cheeks to show someone is blushing, spirals or blank eyes for surprise or stupefaction, gears over a character's head to show they're thinking, and many others.