

Children's Book Insider

April 2015



HOW TO FIND YOUR MANUSCRIPT'S HOOK

WRITING MYSTERIES CRAFTING NONFICTION FIX YOUR STORY'S PROBLEMS

Children's Book Insider

The Newsletter for Children's Writers

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At Presstime:

Publisher Seeks Nonfiction, Educational Fiction That Gives Kids Tools to Succeed

Free Spirit Publishing produces award-winning nonfiction books and learning materials for children and teens, parents and educators that are creative, practical, jargon-free, and have a solution-based focus. Their mission is to provide children and teens with the tools they need to succeed in life and to make a difference in the world. Free Spirit does not publish general fiction or storybooks, books with animal or mythical characters, books with religious or New Age content, single biographies, autobiographies, or memoirs. Seeking proposals in the following categories:

Early Childhood: Board books for ages baby–preschool and picture books for ages 4–8 that focus on social skills and getting along, early learning, self-esteem, and other topics related to positive early childhood development. Will also consider fiction that relates directly to these areas of focus.

Self-Help for Kids®: Titles for ages 8–13 on school success, social skills, bullying, character development, conflict resolution, service learning, self-esteem, and other topics related to positive social and emotional health. Will also consider fiction that relates directly to these areas of focus.

Self-Help for Teens®: Titles for ages 13 and up on life skills, conflict resolution, school success, positive decision making, family issues, character development, social action and civics education, and other topics related to positive social and emotional health.

Gifted & Talented: Books on academic, social, and emotional development for gifted youth of all ages, as well as resources for parents, educators, and other adults who live and work with them.

Learning Differences: Books on academic, social, and emotional development for youth with learning differences, as well as resources for parents, educators, and other adults who live and work with them.

Parenting: Practical, pro-kid books for parents on specific issues related to youth development. Does not publish general parenting titles.

Teaching: Practical, jargon-free materials for educators, counselors, and youth workers that focus on positive youth development, creative teaching strategies, and a wide range of social and emotional needs.

Submit a proposal that includes a cover letter briefly outlining your project, the intended audience (including age ranges), and your relevant expertise; a current résumé; a detailed chapter-by-chapter outline (if longer than an Early Childhood book); at least two sample chapters, or the entire manuscript; a market analysis with a comprehensive listing of similar titles and detailed explanation of how your project differs from available products; a description of your personal promotion plan for the proposed book (including both in-person and social media outreach). Send proposals (with self-addressed, stamped envelope if you want proposal returned) to Free Spirit Publishing, Attn: Acquisitions Editor, 217 Fifth Avenue North, Suite 200, Minneapolis, MN 55401-1299. Allow 2-6 months for reply. To see current Free Spirit titles, go to <http://www.freespirit.com/new-releases/>

Upcoming Children's Nonfiction Conference

The 21st Century Children's Nonfiction Conference 2015 will be held at Manhattan College in Riverdale, NY, on June 12-14. The conference focuses on finding and maximizing opportunities in the children's nonfiction industry, which continues to grow. There are intensives, workshops, panels, and one-on-one consultations with people from Abrams, Chronicle, CreateSpace, Highlights for Children, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, iNK Think Tank, Kids Discover, Lerner Publishing, National Geographic Kids, National Science Teachers Association, New York Public Library, Nickelodeon, NonfictionMinute, Pubslush, Regan Arts, Scholastic, Science Plus, Inc., Simon & Schuster, Trident Media Group, Zest Books, and more. All writers, illustrators, editors, publishers, librarians, educators, and digital developers are welcome. To register, and for full details of the program and faculty, go to <http://www.21CNFC.com>

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At Presstime:

Katherine Paterson Prize for YA and Children's Writing Accepting Entries

The annual Katherine Paterson Prize for YA and Children's Writing is sponsored by *Hunger Mountain*, a print and online journal of the arts that publishes fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, visual art, young adult and children's writing, writing for stage and screen, interviews, reviews, and craft essays. The print issue comes out annually in the fall, and online content changes on a regular basis. The Prize has three categories: Young Adult (for ages 12 and up — a short story or novel excerpt up to 10,000 words); Middle Grade (ages 8-12, short story or novel excerpt of up to 10,000 words); and Picture Book or Writing for Young Children (picture books and short stories for up to age 8). Novel excerpts should stand on their own. Picture book submissions may include pdfs or photocopies of illustrations, but it's not necessary (will be judged by the same standards as text-only picture book entries). One Grand Prize winner will receive \$1000 and publication in *Hunger Mountain*; three category winners will each receive \$100 and publication. Contest is open to all authors, published or unpublished. Entries must be unpublished but may be submitted to publishers while being considered for the Prize (inform *Hunger Mountain* if entry becomes published).

Entries can be sent electronically at <https://hungermtn.submittable.com/submit>. Include a cover letter in the Comments section that lists the age group the story is intended for, and a brief synopsis if the entry is a novel excerpt. Your name should NOT appear anywhere on the manuscript. Print entries may be mailed with an index card with story title, intended age group, your name, address, phone number, and email address. Do not put your name on the manuscript itself. You may also enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope for notification of winners. Entries should be typed, and on one side of the paper only. Send entries to: KPP, *Hunger Mountain*, Vermont College of Fine Arts, 36 College Street, Montpelier, VT 05602.

All entries must be postmarked or emailed by June 30. Each entry must be accompanied by a \$20 entry fee. Make checks payable to "Vermont College of Fine Arts".

This year's judge is Ammi-Joan Paquette, Senior Agent with Erin Murphy Literary Agency. You can read the 2014 winner, "Isadora's Sandalias" by Robin Heald, along with the first place winner in the YA Category, in *Hunger Mountain 19: the BODY issue*. Order at <http://www.hungermtn.org/subscribe/>

New Publisher Seeks Range of Books for Ages 0-10

Don Hoffman, a veteran children's author whose six published books have sold over 1.4 million copies, has launched Peek-A-Boo Publishing. Focusing on works that tell enduring tales and celebrate diversity, the company's titles will be available in both traditional print and digital interactive formats through an association with Brightline Interactive.

Peek-A-Boo has three imprints:

Peek-A-Book Publishing, for children ages 0-3, will feature early concept, board and picture books of under 500 words that tell stories and establish learning concepts for the youngest children.

See-Saw Publishing, for children ages 4-10, will feature books of 400-1500 words. Categories include folk tales, fairy tales, pop-up, novelty, and picture books, and easy-concept nonfiction. See-Saw also focuses on stories that carry important messages to children about both the everyday as well as the extraordinary challenges they face and how to become independent thinkers who understand the difference between right and wrong.

Rainbowkidz Publishing, for ages 0-10, will feature early concept, pop-up, nonfiction, board and picture books, folk and fairy tales that celebrate gay families and loving relationships of all kinds. Rainbowkidz stories focus on modern family relationships and promote self-esteem in children who are themselves gay or part of an LGBT family.

For all imprints, manuscripts up to 500 words may be submitted in their entirety. For manuscripts over 500 words, send a query letter and sample pages or chapters. Include sample artwork if available. If artwork is not yet determined, please indicate so in your submission. Include description of type of book (board/novelty/activity/etc.) and a list of any prior works published. Indicate whether the work being submitted has been or is currently submitted to any other publishers. Submissions are accepted in hard copy format by mail or pdf format via email. Submissions will not be returned. Peek-A-Boo responds to all submissions regardless of interest in publishing within six months of submission date. Please wait for the publisher to contact you. Work may be submitted online through the submission form at <http://www.peakaboopublishing.com/submissions.php>, or mailed to Peek-A-Boo Publishing, 500 Montgomery St., Suite 260, Alexandria, VA 22314. For more information, see the publisher's web site at <http://www.peakaboopublishing.com>

Children's Book Insider makes every effort to verify the legitimacy of small and new presses and literary agents before printing information in "At Presstime." However, authors and illustrators should always proceed with caution when approaching publishers or agents with whom they are unfamiliar, and read contracts carefully. Go to <http://is.gd/9ta64> for a free copy of our Special Report, *How to Determine If a New or Small Press is Legitimate*.

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Writing Workshop

Build Suspense with Dialogue

by Jane McBride Choate

We all know the two primary purposes of dialogue: to reveal character and to advance the story. But dialogue is also a great tool for ratcheting up the suspense factor in stories. Every story should have an element of suspense, whether or not it is labeled as such. From the picture book story of a little boy who has lost his mother at the grocery store to the YA novel of a teenage girl who is contemplating giving her virginity to her boyfriend, there is suspense. Where is the little boy's mother? Will he find her? Will the teen girl give in to her boyfriend's pressure?

So how do we go about using dialogue to amp up the suspense in stories?

Use sparse or clipped dialogue for high tension moments. Picture the following scene as a police detective tries to find out where a kidnapping suspect has taken a little girl:

The detective fixed the man with a hard gaze. "I know you want to tell me where you're holding her. It will go better for you if you talk. It's the difference between hard time and not-so-hard time. Just open your mouth and say the words. It won't hurt. I promise."

Now imagine the scene with this dialogue:

The detective fixed the man with a hard gaze. "Tell me where you're holding her. Now."

There's nothing technically wrong with the first piece of dialogue. Perhaps the detective senses the suspect will open up more with a softer approach. But this dialogue does nothing to raise the suspense level. It has a conversational feel to it. This would work if you want to slow the pacing. (Yes, there are times when a writer wants to take the pacing down a notch or two.)

The second example is terse, hard-hitting. It conveys impatience and temper, even an unspoken threat if the suspect doesn't come through with the information the detective demanded. We can't wait to find out what the detective will do if the suspect doesn't talk.

Use internal dialogue to reveal with-

held information. What kind of information might a 12-year-old girl want to withhold from her mother?

"I need you to look at me and tell me the truth," Samantha's mother said.

Samantha pasted a look of polite inquiry on her face. "I always tell you the truth, Mother." *Yeah, right. You're so stupid you couldn't see the truth if it hit you in the face. You don't even know that I'm being bullied. Or you care if you did.*

Samantha keeps her mother in the dark with her words. Her thoughts, on the other hand, tell us a whole different story.

Use unexpected dialogue where replies are a non-direct response to a question or asking a question in place of giving an answer.

Let's take the example of two teenage girls, one who wants to be asked to the prom, the other who can't give a straight answer:

"What's wrong with me?" Julie asked. "Why won't anyone ask me to the prom?"

"What do you think is wrong with you?" Amy asked, a smirk in her voice.

Julie stared at her friend in frustration. Why did Amy always answer a question with another question? Julie needed a friend, not a shrink. Amy wasn't even a very good shrink.

Why did Amy answer the way she did? Actually, she didn't answer at all. She asked another question and she did so not very kindly (the smirk). We're left feeling that Amy isn't really a friend after all. Why not? Julie thinks of her as a friend, albeit not a very good one in this instance. Clearly Amy has another agenda. Even though this story is not a mystery, it raises questions in the reader's mind and therefore ups the suspense level.

These are only a few ways of how to employ dialogue to build suspense. You may be already doing these things without being aware of it. If so, good for you. If not, try one of these techniques or something else in your work-in-progress. See if you like the results. (I'm betting you will.)

Jane McBride Choate
is a CBI Contributing
Editor

Author Shares Her Process for

A long-time children's book reviewer for *The Horn Book Magazine* and other publications, Christine Heppermann has published five nonfiction books for young readers, including *City Chickens* (Houghton Mifflin, 2012, ages 5 and up), which profiles an inner-city animal shelter that cares for homeless poultry. Her poetry collection for young adults, *Poisoned Apples: Poems for You, My Pretty*, was published by Greenwillow in 2014. Her newest book, an easy reader (*Sadie's Story*, Book 1 of the Backyard Witch series) co-authored with Ron Koertge, is coming out this July from Greenwillow. Christine recently moved from Chicago to New York's Hudson Valley, where there are many apple orchards, but no wicked queens.

Do you write at a specific time of day, for a specific length of time and/or for a specific amount of words/scenes/pages?

I am at my best in the morning. Usually I drop off my girls at the school bus stop and then drive to a coffee shop, where I write until I get fidgety. Sometimes that results in a rough draft of an entire poem; sometimes I will spend an hour writing and erasing the same sentence--or the same two words--over and over. That's when I know it's time to take a walk.

Are you an outliner or a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pantser?

For several of my nonfiction books I was required by the publisher to write outlines, and it was comforting to have an outline as a road map for when I felt lost in the middle of a manuscript. It was even more comforting to ignore the outline and set off in a different direction.

When you sit down to write, what is your process? Do you start where you left off the day before? Do you edit and revise as you go or let the words and ideas free flow?

My ideas hardly ever flow. They trickle. I'm always editing and reshaping as I go. It's a slow process, sometimes painfully so, but I know that's just the way I work, and I try to be Zen about it.

Where do you look for ideas and inspiration?

All over the place. For my poetry collection, ideas came everywhere from classic fairy tales to *Shape* magazine to sordid incidents from my past.

How do you choose your topics and themes?

I don't. They choose me. Although for most of my nonfiction I was assigned topics and did fine with them. But for my poetry and fiction--I'm working on a YA novel in verse, for instance--I can always tell when I'm trying to force a message or theme because the poem/story stays flat. When I let it be what it wants to be, it inflates.

Do you listen and observe the people and places around you and pull from real life inspiration? Or are your topics and characters completely crafted from your own interests and background and imagination?

I think it's impossible not to draw from real life at least a little, don't you? Even when writing fantasy, real life and imagination can't help but intertwine.

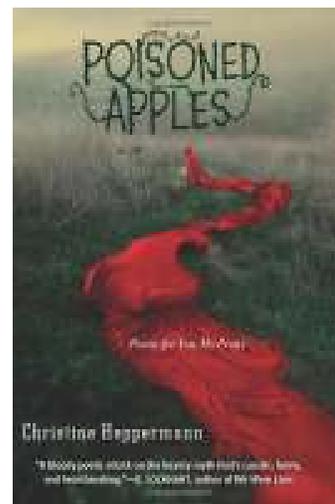
Too true! What about writer's block — is that ever a problem for you?

I'd call it perfectionism rather than writer's block. The fear of writing anything because I know it won't be "good enough." When this happens, I somehow have to trick my brain into believing that my work might be the worst configuration of words ever committed to paper and it doesn't matter. My brain doesn't always fall for this tactic.

So when things are clicking and your words are flowing, how do you decide when and with whom to share your emerging story? Do you have a core of pre readers and/or focus groups?

I have a trusted writer friend who sees early drafts of most of my poems. Usually I don't show my work to anyone else--too many opinions give me the spins--until I feel it's ready for my agent's eyes. I've been a book reviewer for so long that I feel I have a decent sense for when a draft is polished. Decent, but not perfect, of course.

It's hard to even count drafts of a poem, because I'm constantly changing a word or a line here and there, and rearranging stanzas. Typically I work on a poem for a day or two, until I feel it's



Writing a Wide Range of Books

interview by Anne Tews Schwab

in pretty good shape. Then I send it along to my writer friend. Then we have a dialogue. I love that part of the process.

Have you ever hated something you wrote? If so, what did you do?

Every day I write something and hate it. What I do is keep writing/revising it until I don't hate it any more.

What is your favorite topic/theme to write about?

I wrote *City Chickens* because I'm drawn to stories about people with unique passions, and Mary and Bert, who run Chicken Run Rescue animal shelter in Minneapolis, certainly fit that description. I don't know if "favorite" is the right word to describe this, but I've written a lot of poems about how damaging our society is to girls and how that makes me mad.

Do you have a favorite audience you tend to write towards?

No. Currently I'm working on the YA novel in verse, a middle grade epistolary novel, and some picture book manuscripts. I'm an all-ages kind of girl!

If you had to do it all over again, would you change anything about the way you wrote City Chickens or Poisoned Apples?

Hmmm...for *City Chickens*, I'd say, no.

I told the story I wanted to tell, even though I knew its main message--that it is possible to look at chickens in a different way, as pets instead of food--was a little out there and not something everyone would agree with.

For *Poisoned Apples*, my answer is also no.

Word on the street is that poetry doesn't sell. Thus, many people told me I needed to turn the manuscript into a novel in verse. But I'm very happy--and lucky!--to have found an editor, Martha Mihalick at Greenwillow, who shared my vision of the book as a thematic collection and helped me further develop it in that direction.

How long did it take -- from first draft to publication -- to finish writing this book? How does that compare with the times frame of your first published book?

City Chickens is a project I began when I started the MFA program in writing for children at Hamline University in 2008. Three out of my four Hamline advisors helped me shape it (my

fourth advisor worked with me exclusively on poetry), and a few months after I graduated from the program in 2010 I heard that Houghton Mifflin wanted to publish it. That was a nice graduation present.

I also started the *Poisoned Apples* poems at Hamline, though the theme of the collection (body image, eating disorders, self-esteem) didn't take shape until after I graduated. I'd say the time frame for *Poisoned Apples* was about a year and a half from when I began writing/organizing the poems to when it was accepted for publication.

Do you write any of your books with a specific moral or message in mind?

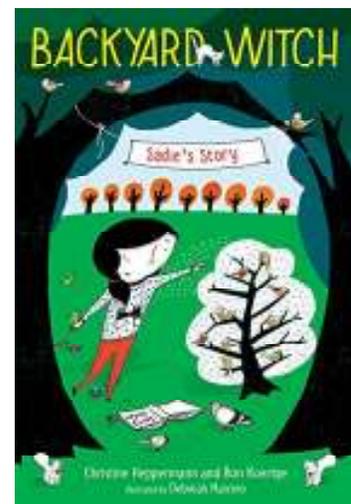
I love ideas and themes. I hate morals. I never want to tell a reader what s/he is supposed to believe. I think questions are more important--and more fun--than answers.

What is the hardest part of writing a book? What is the easiest?

With all my writing, the hardest part is sitting down and making myself do it. Once I get over that hurdle, I find that that is also the easiest part. It's ultimately much easier, psychologically speaking, to write than it is to berate myself for not writing!

If you had to come up with a top ten list of thoughts for other writers, what would make the list?

For my top ten tips, I am tempted to say "write" ten times, because, in the end, sitting down (or standing at your treadmill desk, or dictating while standing on your head) and doing the work is what matters. But instead I will say it only nine times, with my tenth tip being "Be kind to yourself." Because writing is a difficult, often lonely business and to survive, maybe even thrive, you need to be your own best friend.



Anne Tews Schwab is a writer and a poet, a musician, music teacher and music therapist, a sailor, squash player, skier and biker. *Capsized*, her young adult novel in verse, is available on Kindle. Visit Anne on her website, <http://www.piratepoems.com>, where she posts a new pirate poem every day.

New on the CBI Children's Writing Knowledge Base

In case you haven't stopped by the Knowledge Base lately (and you really should--it's part of your membership!) here is a list of new posts from the last month. Remember, you need to be logged in with your username and password to access the posts at <http://cbiclubhouse.com>.

Productivity and the Writing Life by Jane McBride Choate

Glossary of Common Publishing Terms. Terms are defined for both beginning and more advanced writers.

<http://cbiclubhouse.com/clubhouse/glossary-of-common-publishing-terms/>

Start with One Sentence by Suzanna Henshon

<http://cbiclubhouse.com/clubhouse/start-with-one-sentence/>

Crafting Young Sleuths and Formidable

Readers of all ages love mysteries. This genre is perennially popular, and can be combined with other genres (romance, historical fiction, horror) for an original story with a strong hook. But at its core, every mystery needs two elements: a sleuth and a villain. Let's take a look at what makes these characters memorable.

Sleuths

What makes a good sleuth for children's and young adult books? What qualities give him/her the skill to solve a crime? Does he need to have great physical strength? What about unusual intelligence? While these qualities certainly don't hurt, they are not necessary to make a convincing young detective.

Some of the best detectives aren't the smartest or biggest kid around. In fact, they're quite ordinary. Those of you of a certain age may remember Trixie Belden. Trixie was an ordinary girl. She wasn't the prettiest girl in her class, but she had curiosity and a good-sized helping of courage.

While a child or teen sleuth doesn't have to be a genius, there are some qualities that you can't skip for this character:

She must be curious. Only the curious individual asks questions, a necessary component for solving a mystery. This curiosity may land her in trouble from time to time, but she always finds a way out of the scrapes she lands in.

She must be determined. A skillfully crafted mystery will present the sleuth with a series of setbacks to overcome. The young detective must have a tenacious nature to navigate these problems. This determination will come in handy if her parents or teachers or an older sibling try to convince her to give up the quest.

She must be engaging. A sleuth in adult mysteries doesn't have to be particularly likable. Some of the most popular detectives weren't overly engaging. Take Monk, for example, the OCD private detective from the recent cable TV series. He was downright annoying with all of his phobias and fears. The same applies for Columbo, the seemingly bumbling television detective of decades ago who pestered people until they finally gave up. A young sleuth, however, should be likable. Readers want to identify with her. An

unlikable sleuth, however smart, will turn the reader off from wanting to be like her and probably will not root for her.

She must have flaws as well as positive qualities. A perfect child or teenager is boring. Make her impatient or impulsive. Or give him an impairment. Perhaps he suffers from dyslexia and that appears to slow down his investigation. Carry this one step further and have the character's flaws or impairment eventually aid in solving the mystery.

She must have a strong motive for wanting to solve the mystery. Let's make up a story of a 12-year-old girl who is trying to find out who is stealing neighborhood pets. Why is this so important to her? Her best friend's golden lab, a service dog specially trained to help the friend who suffers from epilepsy, is missing. Our young heroine follows a trail of clues to a ring of dognappers who steal purebred pets and re-sell them. She restores her friend's golden lab to her, along with returning the other stolen pets to their owners.

The crime or mystery must be appropriate for your targeted readers age group. Let's make up another story, this one about a 10-year-old girl who seeks to solve the mystery of the missing library books. She is motivated to solve this because her teacher has told the class that if the books aren't returned there won't be any more reading time. Our heroine finds that a classmate is taking the books to help teach his family, who are immigrants to the United States, English. She confronts him and then helps him find another way to obtain reading material for his family. An older sleuth can deal with a more serious crime, such as finding out who vandalized the school gymnasium, causing tens of thousands of dollars worth of damage.

Younger sleuths need a "hook" to their detective abilities. Chapter book mysteries are often in series format, with the series built around a particular talent the young detective uses to solve crimes: a photographic memory, encyclopedic knowledge of science facts, or a knack for solving puzzles. This trait gives them an edge for piecing together clues. These sleuths often have a recurring sidekick who fills in a talent or two the detective lacks.

Ensemble casts of detectives combine skills. Some series (particularly chapters books for ages 7-10 or young middle grade mysteries)

Villains in Mysteries for Kids and Teens

by Jane McBride Choate

might feature a cast of several friends who solve mysteries together. Give each of your young detectives unique talents that add to the dynamic of the group.

In middle grade and young adult mysteries, the sleuth is often confronting other issues in her life. While the mystery provides the framework for the story, these books also have the hero facing other traditional teen and pre-teen issues: establishing one's place in a new school, dealing with parents' divorce, preparing for college, yearning for independence, etc. Young adult mysteries may have the sleuth solving more real-world crimes, such as murder, high-level theft or kidnapping.

Make your young sleuth someone readers will want to get to know better. Make her curious, determined, flawed, and engaging. Who knows? If your sleuth has enough qualities to keep her solving mysteries, your book might turn into a series!

Villains

Who doesn't love a good villain? Think Darth Vader in *Star Wars*. The Sheriff of Nottingham in *Robin Hood*. The big bad wolf in *Three Little Pigs*. And, of course, the wicked witch in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Without a villain, who will the protagonist struggle against? No one. Villains need to be crafted with as much care as do heroes. Cardboard, single dimensional villains will not suffice for today's sophisticated young readers. Just as readers want heroes they can relate to, they also want villains who are real.

Does this mean a hero and a villain cannot be larger than life? Not at all. Just be sure that you are drawing your heroes and villains with real traits.

Okay, so what are the traits of a believable villain?

He must have a motive. Without a plausible and compelling reason to commit a crime, a villain won't ring true. He needs to strive for a goal, even if that goal is evil. Make his goal believable for his age. A six-year-old boy won't have a reason to steal a test and frame his friend. A 16-year-old boy, however, could know how to steal a test from a computer and then frame his friend for the

theft.

He must have the skills to commit the crime. In the above example, a boy who is computer illiterate probably doesn't have the skill to steal a test from a teacher's computer.

He must be a match to the hero. A stupid villain will not challenge the hero and, in fact, makes the hero appear stupid as well. Likewise, the villain should be a physical match to the hero.

He must be believable. Few people are 100% flawed, just as few are 100% perfect. Give your villain a redeeming quality. Perhaps he has a soft spot for animals. Even if he is on a murderous rampage, he avoids running over a stray dog in the road. Once again, give him a reason why he has this quality. Did he have a dog as a child and his parents made him get rid of it?

He must have the opportunity to commit his crimes. If your villain is a teenager who steals from the homes of his wealthy friends' parents during the day, give him a reason why he isn't in school. Or change the time when he is committing the robberies.

His reasons for committing a crime must be appropriate for your targeted age group. If you are writing a story for late elementary readers, you probably won't write a villain who is murdering his friends. What could your villain do? Perhaps someone is stealing food from lunch boxes from the classroom. Our sleuth, a fourth grade boy, decides to solve the series of thefts. He discovers that a schoolmate is homeless and is stealing the food to take back to his parents and little sister. In this case, the villain becomes a sympathetic character. That's okay. The important thing is that you've given him a real reason for acting as he does. (Of course your nine-year-old hero will find a way to help the boy. That's what makes him a hero.)

Villains can be challenging to write well. Give him as much as attention as you do your main characters. Understand what makes him tick. Make certain he has both strengths and weaknesses.

Remember, your villain activates your sleuth. Make him a worthy opponent.

Suggested Reading

Chapter Book series (ages 7-10)

The A to Z Mysteries by Ron Roy
The Jigsaw Jones Mysteries by James Preller
The Cam Jansen Mysteries by David Adler

Middle Grade (ages 8-12)

Three Times Lucky (Tupelo Landing #1) by Sheila Turnage
Capture the Flag (A Silver Jaguar Society Mystery) by Kate Messner
Gilda Joyce: Psychic Investigator (Gilda Joyce #1) by Jennifer Allison

Young Adult (ages 12 and up)

Stormbreaker (Alex Rider #1) by Anthony Horowitz
When You Reach Me by Rebecca Stead
Shelter (Mickey Bolitar #1) by Harlan Coben

Jane McBride Choate is the author of 33 novels, numerous short stories and articles, and a CBI Contributing Editor. Follow her writing blog at <http://www.janemchoate.blogspot.com>

One Author's Advice

Don't Skin the Cat! Better Ways to Solve a Story Problem

by Hilari Bell

If you're getting feedback from critiquers, sooner or later you'll be told that something in your story isn't working and you should probably cut it. But should you? The answer to that is a solid, definite, maybe. Sometimes you can follow Tim Gunn's famous advice and "Make it work!" And sometimes, you may need to cut something out. But before you commit to story surgery, particularly if some part of your heart is rebelling, consider these examples from my own experience, and that of some writing friends.

One scene in the story feels tacked on. When my critique group read one of my recent books, they said that the action in one chapter felt as if it didn't fit with the rest of the plot, as if it had only been added to show Michael using magic. (Which was, in fact, the case.) They advised me to cut it, and show Michael using magic in some way that fit in with the rest of the plot. And since they were exactly right about how that chapter came to be, I tried very hard to come up with another idea. I even came up with one...and then my subconscious shut down my brain, in the way it does when it's trying to tell me something. And it kept my brain shut down for the better part of a week, until I realized that instead of cutting that scene, and working in the new one I'd devised (which would have needed at least three more new chapters to support it) I could make my original chapter work if I simply set it up better. I created a situation earlier in the story that made it necessary for Michael to do what he does. This in turn made the action in my problem chapter an obstacle the protagonist is forced to overcome, instead of something he volunteers to do. It also needed to have consequences that reached out into the rest of the plot. But doing all of that was a lot easier, and more satisfying, than cutting one chapter and trying to work a four chapter subplot into my already fairly dense storyline.

One character is out of balance with the others. This usually occurs when a writer has two or more protagonists. The trickiest part of having multiple POV characters is that they all need to have nearly the same weight and impact in the story. If one is slighter than the others, less important to the plot, or has a lesser character arc, then he won't "fit." Critiquers will tell you, "You know, you could cut that person." And you could, but the alternative is to build up that weaker character. Find some way to make him more important to the plot, to make him essential to the story's climax. Figure out something important you can take from him, so he has to struggle to get it back. Give him some flaw that blows up the other protagonists' efforts, so he has to overcome that flaw and redeem himself for the team to win. Think up something that's incredibly precious to him, that he has to give up forever to make the climax of the story come out right, and make that sacrifice moving and memorable. If you do even one of those things, you can probably keep your character. He might even become the reader's favorite!

Some aspect of the story setting/character background doesn't impact the plot. A high school girl is trying to get in with the popular kids, and one of the details of her background that hinders her efforts is that her mother is an ardent and outspoken feminist. Instead of leaving that detail alone and irrelevant to your storyline (and therefore in danger of getting the ax) have the girl discover that her only hope of achieving popularity is to become a cheerleader—a role her mother regards as "gender treason." When our heroine tentatively reveals this desire to her mother, Mom starts movement to ban cheerleading throughout the school district—maybe the state! The heroine has to pretend her afternoon practices are meetings of the chess club. When she starts sneaking into games in disguise, past feminist protesters led by her own mother, no reader will be thinking that her mother's feminism is irrelevant.

A sub-plot doesn't tie into the main plot. Subplots can enrich your story in many wondrous ways—but unless they tie into the main storyline at some point, they're also prime candidates for surgery. Frequently when this happens, the subplot deals with the protagonist's personal life, and the primary plot deals with something that's more external. Maybe your heroine's main problem is solving a mystery, and she's also having trouble with her mother's desire to make her a star, or her boyfriend's attracted to another girl. If your subplots don't impact the mystery in some way, critiquers may tell you, "that subplot was fun, but it didn't seem important or necessary. But what if the girl who's stealing the protagonist's boyfriend is also the villain who's stealing her classmates' identities? And when the heroine first tries to expose her, everyone believes that she's accusing the villain because she's jealous, and the boyfriend dumps her for the villain because of it? Or say that the mystery is why some nice old man next door committed suicide...and it turns out that the reason her ambitious mother is insisting the protagonist star in that commercial is because Mother needs money to pay off a blackmailer...the same blackmailer whose demands forced the neighbor to kill himself. If you tie subplots into the main plot, instead of being unnecessary distractions, they add richness and complexity to your novel—and no one would dream of asking you to cut them.

Most first drafts have something in them that you can and should excise. Creating sentences, paragraphs, even occasional scenes that actually are extraneous is a normal part of the writing processes. But when it comes to the larger parts of your story, if someone recommends surgery, ask them to help you come up with ways to make that seemingly unnecessary piece essential and meaningful instead. Because my experience is that your story usually becomes stronger if you turn down your inner surgeon, and channel your inner Tim Gunn instead—and you can almost always "Make it work!"

Hilari Bell writes science fiction and fantasy for kids and teens. Her most recent book is Scholar's Plot, book 5 in the Knight & Rogue series, and her website is: <http://www.HilariBell.com>

Writing Workshop

Finding Your Story's Hook

by Suzanna Henshon, PhD.

Does your story have a hook? Many writers have trouble fishing for a unique narrative. They write too closely to what's already in the marketplace, thinking if it worked once, surely another similar book will also sell. But the only way to truly build an audience is to stand out from the crowd. And the only way readers will find you is if your book has a hook that makes it immediately identifiable, instantly lets the reader know what the story is about, and is easy for kids and parents to recommend to their friends.

A hook, by definition, is the simple premise of your story. It's that 15-30 second pitch that gets people to pick up your book and look at it. A hook is the short description that identifies what a story is about and shows how it is different from anything else out there.

Here are some examples:

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone tells the story of a young wizard who discovers his magical heritage in his first year at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. With the help of his friends, Harry faces an attempted comeback by the dark wizard Lord Voldemort, who killed Harry's parents but failed to kill Harry when he was just a year old.

The Dogs of Babel is a story about a man whose wife falls to her death while picking apples. In trying to learn why this tragic event took place, the husband attempts to communicate with the dog, who was present when Lexi fell.

Sam and Dave Dig a Hole is the story of two boys digging a hole; they who won't stop until they find something spectacular. Will the boys find the jewels buried just beyond their shovels' reach?

In *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*, a bus driver takes a break from his route, instructing the reader to not let the pigeon drive the bus while he's gone. Then the pigeon appears and pleads, wheedles, and begs his way through the book. It's up to the readers to decide the pigeon's fate. (This hook describes the tone of the story and the unique participation by the readers.)

The hook actually has two parts which

you'll identify during the writing process. You'll pinpoint the first part—the concept hook—when you're conceiving the story idea. Ask yourself, "Why would someone want to read my book? What is it that I am really offering to the reader?" What is unique about this particular idea, or the way it evolves into a story? Get specific. A sweet bedtime story is not a hook. Neither is a middle grade novel about moving to a new neighborhood and starting a new school. Both are broad themes that can be the basis for a compelling story, but the hook is in the details. What if the novel is about a girl whose new house is at the edge of a graveyard, and her school is populated with ghosts of former students? What if your bedtime story is about nocturnal animals who go to sleep when the sun comes up? The elements that provide a hook will also steer you toward a unique plot.

Next, you'll identify your sales hook when you pitch your manuscript in a query letter to an editor or agent. The hook will also appear in the description on the book's jacket, and in your book's listing on Amazon. You'll also identify Amazon search keywords based on your hook. If those keywords aren't unique, a search will pull up a lot of titles along with yours.

The sales hook is essentially a one to three sentence synopsis of your plot. As you are writing your sales hook, remember that the reader doesn't need to know every detail of the story. You want them to be compelled to read the entire book. The sales hook identifies the main character, the primary conflict, and one or two obstacles that character will face, but it also needs to convey the tone of the story. This is true whether you're delivering your hook in writing (as in a query letter) or in person (when you meet an editor or agent at a conference).

The concept hook and sales hook are like two sides of a coin. One can't exist without the other. A poorly-conceived story won't sell because it will get lost in the crowd of similar ideas. A clever concept makes writing strong query letter a breeze. Make sure your hook is solid at both ends of the writing process, and you'll reel in your readers.

Crafting your story's concept hook:

Begin by filling out this sentence:

"This is the story of (name your main character) who wants more than anything to (name the goal your character wants to reach, or the problem he wants to solve), but can't because (name the one or two biggest obstacles standing in his way)."

Now work on the parts you've filled in, making them more specific and unusual. Play around with various options until you create something truly original.

Do this before you start your first draft, so you know who your character is and where your plot is going.

Dr. Suzanna E. Henshon teaches full-time at Florida Gulf Coast University and is the author of several young adult books. Her newest book, *Andy Lightfoot and the Time Warp*, is available for the Kindle on Amazon.

Notes on Nonfiction

Passion and Purpose in Writing Nonfiction

by Jane McBride Choate

If you're unsure how to approach a nonfiction topic for different age readers, study some children's magazines. Each magazine is tuned to a specific age group, and the articles will reflect the tone and content that appeals to that age. Start by Googling "magazines for children", or look in the Magazines category of *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market*. Most print magazines now have sample issues online, so you can easily read recent articles.

What are your goals in penning a nonfiction article or book? What are your reasons for writing it? These are important questions to ask before choosing a subject and embarking upon a project. To help know if you have the passion and purpose necessary to write on this subject, it is helpful to ask some questions:

What do you want your readers to think about a subject? Suppose you want to write an article for middle grade children about how to start a recycling program in their school. You are passionate about this and want to educate readers about the importance of recycling, and get them excited about taking action. What evidence can you bring to bear to prove your point? Will you interview other middle graders who have started their own recycling programs? Will you talk about global warming and preserving the environment? What about experts? Will you bring in their opinions? Are there any negatives to recycling that you should also explore?

What should you assume your readers already know about a subject? Both children's books and magazines are targeted to a specific age range, so your first step is to identify the audience you want to reach, and tailor your approach to your readers. In our recycling example above, a piece for children in kindergarten through third grade might explain exactly what recycling is, what different recyclable products are made of, and how recycling keeps trash out of landfills. Fourth through sixth graders already understand the basics, and are ready for an article on setting up a recycling program in their home or school. They'd also appreciate craft projects that re-purpose items instead of throwing them away. Readers in seventh grade and above can think on a larger scale—how to get involved on a community level to establish recycling in their neighborhood parks, or how to be smart consumers and buy products that are made from recycled materials.

How do you want to present yourself to your readers? As an explorer, learning new things just as the readers do? As knowledgeable? As impassioned? My favorite nonfiction pieces, whether article or book, invite me, the reader, to come along on a voyage of discovery with the author. I want to learn as he does what makes this subject vital, interesting, or just plain fun. Young readers particularly like the idea of dis-

covery. Instead of simply presenting a recitation of facts, take your readers on a trip. Let them feel your passion for this subject, whether it be the invention of the printing press or the story of the sacrifices pioneers made to start new lives in the American west.

One of the best ways to make a subject interesting to young readers is to relate it to their own lives. If you're writing about life 200 years ago, adding facts about what kids ate for breakfast, what they learned at school, or the games they played at recess helps readers see history as a living topic.

How should you open the piece? We all know the importance of opening a novel with a hook that will grab the reader immediately and pull him into the story. The same applies for opening a nonfiction book or article. What if you are writing a biography of a little-known person, an ordinary man who has done extraordinary things? Rather than beginning with the man's birth (a safe but predictable opening), find that kernel of greatness in him and open with it. Discover what turns an ordinary person into someone readers should learn about. This involves research and a different viewpoint. This approach works equally well if you are writing about a well-known individual. Find a little known fact about your subject and lead with that. Don't tell us when Abraham Lincoln was born. Instead, tell us that he found time in the darkest hours of the Civil War to meet with the mother of a soldier condemned to death and listen to her pleas for mercy.

How should you end the piece? If the beginning of a book or article is the most important part, the ending comes in a near second, for it is the closing words that will most likely stick in the reader's mind ... and heart. It is especially imperative that you end a biography in a memorable way (preferably not with the subject's death!). Choose an incident in the person's life that most clearly defines him or her and leave the readers with that picture in their minds.

Of course there are other questions you can and should ask yourself before embarking on the journey of writing nonfiction. These are only a springboard to get you started. Be honest, be passionate, be willing to do the hard work to bring your subject alive.

Jane McBride Choate has published 33 novels, numerous essays in *Chicken Soup for the Soul* anthologies, and had her work appear in several magazines.