

# I'VE WRITTEN A STORY. WHAT DO I DO NOW?



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## INSIDER SECRETS FOR SUBMITTING YOUR MANUSCRIPT TO PUBLISHERS & MAGAZINES

By Laura Backes,  
Publisher, *Children's Book Insider*,  
*the Newsletter for Children's Writers*

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## WHAT DO I DO NOW?

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When we decided to create a collection of our best pieces about submitting a manuscript for publication, the easiest part was coming up with the title.

"I've written a story. What do I do now?" is easily the most commonly asked question we receive. Writers seem thoroughly confused and intimidated about the process of sending a manuscript off to publishers, and they're desperate for straight advice.

Thus, this eBook.

Before we begin, our standard caveat: you may think your story is written and completed, but it probably isn't. Even the most successful children's writers tend to write, re-write and re-write some more before they even think about calling their manuscript complete. Do yourself a favor - get a copy of our eBook "*Improving the Odds - Insider Secrets That Can Help You Get Published*". It's our best advice about how to turn an imperfect manuscript into a finished, ready to publish manuscript. Go to <http://write4kids.com/odds.html> for all the details. For under nine bucks, this information can make a huge difference in your ability to get a publishing contract.

Now, if you're *really* ready to submit, you'll find the information we're about to share invaluable. We haven't tried to create a complete, step-by-step guide to submitting a manuscript - there are already plenty of books that do a good job of that (*Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market*, for example, is an essential book for all submitting authors). Rather, this eBook is something quite different.

This is a collection of insider tips, little-known techniques and real-world advice of the sort you might get if you had lunch with a successful author, or were able to pick the brain of a top editor. We'll go beyond book submission issues (formatting, query letter writing, etc.) and provide tips about copyright, agents and money, and we'll share some great tips about submitting magazine articles, too.

Here's how the book breaks down:

- **OUR EXCLUSIVE SUCCESS CHECKLISTS:** These are some of the most popular articles we've ever published, presented together for the first time. Our checklists are easy to use step-by-step guides that you can use to make certain your manuscript is tight and ready to go. Run your manuscript through these checklists and you'll have a big advantage over the competition!

- **SUBMISSION SECRETS:** We'll cover formatting, essential submission techniques, query letters, plot synopses, special tricks to stand out from the slush pile, insider tips and much more.
- **AGENTS, COPYRIGHT & MONEY TIPS:** The lowdown on copyrights, the pros and cons of getting an agent, getting paid, how to research a publisher before signing a contract.
- **MAGAZINE SUBMISSION TIPS:** Exclusive insight about selling your work to magazines.

Here are some tips to get the most of this book:

1. Be willing to admit that you're not quite ready to submit your manuscript. Take my word for it - editors can sniff out a faulty manuscript from across the room. If our checklists tell you that there's work to be done on your story, do it. Otherwise, you're wasting your time.
2. Be creative...to a point. Putting together a submission package should allow for some creativity. By bringing some flair to, say, a cover letter, you can gain an advantage. But keep within the rules and always strive to be professional.
3. Trust the advice of professionals. In the article *Submission Tips From The Masters* author/editor Jane Yolen gives some simple - yet astonishingly powerful - advice about writing a cover letter. This tiny bit of instruction from a true publishing legend can change everything about your career path. This book is filled with that sort of advice. Amateurs try to reinvent the wheel, budding professionals take heed of what successful authors have to say. Listen well.

Laura Backes

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# OUR EXCLUSIVE SUCCESS CHECKLISTS

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# THE ULTIMATE EDITING CHECKLIST

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Good writers all have something in common—they're also good editors. But learning how to edit your work can be intimidating if you don't know where to begin. And while each book is different, every strong manuscript contains certain characteristics. Below is a checklist to help you determine if your work stacks up, and to pinpoint where you need to focus your editing energies:

## *General Writing Tips*

- ✿ Have you written as succinctly as possible? Does every character, scene and plot twist move the story forward?
- ✿ Have you used active language that creates strong, concrete images in the reader's mind as opposed to passive language?
- ✿ Do you use specific verbs that convey emotion as well as action? General, vague verbs (went, moved, stood, spoke) don't work as hard as exact words (crept, shuffled, slouched, whispered).
- ✿ Are your descriptions vivid without being wordy? Do they contain sensory information beyond visual elements (sounds, smells, etc.)?

## *General Fiction Tips*

- ✿ Is your theme clear in your own mind? Do you convey this theme to the reader through the plot, or are you forced to explain the theme outright? The underlying meaning of the story should be expressed by the events in the book and how the main character changes, not by stating a moral or lesson.
- ✿ Are your characters multilayered and believable? Do they have goals and problems a reader of the book's intended audience will care about and identify with?
- ✿ Does the plot evolve from your main character, because of your main character, and is it resolved by your main character?
- ✿ Does the story start at or very close to an event which threatens to change your main character's life in some way, and end once your character's life returns to normal?
- ✿ Does your dialogue contain the essence of speech, rather than being cluttered with elements of realistic conversation? Does the dialogue also move the plot along or give insight into the character?



## ***General Nonfiction Tips***

- Have you researched the market to see what's already out there on your topic, and found a way to make your book different?
- Have you chosen an approach to your topic that will appeal to your intended audience?
- Does your topic tie in with the curriculum of relevant school grades?
- Is your writing active, lively and interesting? Does it use storytelling elements (anecdotes, personal histories, case studies) and/or is the information arranged in a way to be entertaining as well as informative?
- Have you gathered more information than you'll need, relying heavily on primary sources and interviews? Is this information well-documented for your publisher?

## ***Picture Books (fiction)***

- Does your manuscript fall into one of these two categories: up to 1000 words in length with a story that will appeal to kids ages 2-5, or 1500 words or less with a story appropriate for ages 4-8?
- Is the writing spare and tight? Do you convey the plot through action and concrete events and images?
- Have you avoided abstract concepts or concerns more relevant to an adult than a child? Have you resisted preaching to your reader?
- Are your characters childlike in the way they view the world?
- Have you avoided description that the illustrator can provide in the pictures?
- Is your story unique and original? Will the editor be surprised at the ending?
- Is the language rhythmic and interesting?

## ***Rhyming Picture Books***

- All of the above writing tips, plus:
- Does the story have strong characters and a plot with a beginning, middle and end?
- Does the action move quickly, and does the writing inspire strong visual images?

- ✿ Is the writing tight and spare, and devoid of clichés or unnecessary words thrown in just to make the rhyme work?
- ✿ Is the meter consistent and easy to read out loud?
- ✿ Does the rhyme and meter fit the tone of the story, and is the rhyme secondary to the plot?
- ✿ Could this story have been told just as well (or better) if it didn't have to fit the constraints of a rhyming format? If so, try writing it in prose.

### ***Picture Books (nonfiction)***

- ✿ Is your manuscript up to 1500 words (for readers up to age 8) or up to 3000 words (for to age 10)?
- ✿ Have you chosen a very specific aspect of a broader topic?
- ✿ Have you given the reader enough basic information to understand what you're presenting? Don't assume your readers have any prior knowledge of the topic.
- ✿ Can your subject be easily illustrated with artwork or photographs? Is the subject diverse enough to support different pictures on each page?
- ✿ Have you presented your topic in a way that the reader can see a connection to his or her everyday life?

### ***Easy Readers (fiction)***

- ✿ All of the writing tips for picture books, plus:
- ✿ Is your manuscript up to 2000 words, and appropriate for kids ages 6-8? (Check the easy reader requirements on specific publishers' writing guidelines for exact word counts.)
- ✿ Does your main character have one or two identifiable characteristics that influence the plot?
- ✿ Do you write in clear, straightforward, grammatically correct sentences? Does each sentence contain one complete thought?
- ✿ Do you use a lot of dialogue to break up the text on the page and move the story along?
- ✿ Does the story rely heavily on illustrations?
- ✿ Does the story revolve around events that feel familiar to the reader?
- ✿ Have you used humor whenever possible that appeals to children 6-8 (visual humor and wordplay)?

### ***Easy Readers (nonfiction)***

- ☒ All the content tips for picture book nonfiction, all the structural tips for easy readers, plus:
- ☒ Does the information you present tie in with the curriculum in first and second grade?
- ☒ Have you included activities connected to your topic that kids can easily do at home or in the classroom? Do they use materials that are inexpensive and readily available?

### ***Chapter Books (fiction)***

- ☒ Is the manuscript between 35-50 pages long, with a story appropriate for ages 7-10?
- ☒ Do you have a straightforward plot that stems from a single incident? Have you avoided subplots?
- ☒ Is your manuscript broken up into short chapters of 2-4 manuscript pages each? Does each chapter encompass one plot point, and begin and end on a dramatic note?
- ☒ Regardless of genre, does your book ultimately deal with incidents and experiences that will feel familiar to your reader?
- ☒ Have you kept the plot moving quickly, and allowed your characters to experience the same range of emotions as your audience?
- ☒ Have you made the story meatier and the writing a bit more complex than an easy reader, but still relied primarily on action and dialogue to tell your story?

### ***Chapter Books (nonfiction)***

- ☒ All the tips for chapter book fiction, plus:
- ☒ Does the information you present tie in with the curriculum in third and fourth grade?
- ☒ Have you found an interesting or creative angle to a subject kids already have some basic knowledge in? Does your book build in this basic knowledge and inspire the reader to investigate further?
- ☒ Have you included an index (if applicable), activities and an additional reading list kids can utilize to explore the topic in depth?

- Did you write from a kid-friendly angle, such as focusing on the childhood of an historic figure or shown how certain inventions have changed kids' lives?
- Does the content move along quickly, and have you used humor when possible?
- Does your topic lend itself well to being heavily illustrated with artwork or photographs?

### ***Middle Grade (fiction)***

- Is your manuscript about 80-120 pages long, with a story that will appeal to kids 8-12 years old?
- Is your writing rich and interesting, with full-length sentences and paragraphs?
- Are your characters well-developed, with unique, unpredictable characteristics? Do they have both strengths and weaknesses? Do they reflect the concerns and outlook of a middle grade reader?
- Have you presented the characters' emotions realistically, and allowed them to have strong feelings?
- Is the plot complicated enough to last the length of the book, but still relevant to a middle grader's life?
- Have you developed 1-3 subplots (involving the main character or secondary characters) that are connected to the main plot but concern a different aspect of character growth or plot resolution?
- If you're writing genre fiction (fantasy, science fiction, mysteries, etc.) have you studied books in the genre and learned the specific rules for plot development?
- Is the dialogue realistic for your characters' ages?
- Have you explored more sophisticated, complicated themes that will get your reader thinking, such as the nature of good and evil, how a person relates to those around him, the responsibility that comes with being a friend, or the interplay of family relationships?

### ***Middle Grade (nonfiction)***

- All the tips for chapter book nonfiction, adjusted to be applicable to the middle grade age of 8-12, plus:
  - Is your manuscript 60-100 pages long? Do you know of photos that can be used to illustrate the work?
  - When possible, have you broken up the chapters with subheads that help outline the information?
  - Have you built on middle graders' growing interest in the world around them, but still presented the topic in a way that's relevant to their lives?
  - Have you incorporated as many middle grade storytelling techniques as possible? (For example, if writing a biography, have you presented your subject as a well-developed character?) Have you used only documented incidents and dialogue?
  - Does your book include an index, glossary (if needed), further reading and possible discussion questions or activities that can be used at home or in the classroom?

### ***Young Adult (fiction)***

- All the writing tips for middle grade fiction, plus:
  - Is your manuscript approximately 100-150 pages long, for readers age 11 and up?
  - Are your characters true to the adolescent/teenage experience? Do they think and act like real teenagers?
  - Are your characters bumping up against adult experiences and/or the "real world" for the first time?
  - By the end of the book, has your main character taken an important step toward becoming an adult and being more concerned with the world around him than himself?
  - Have you presented events realistically, as a young adult would experience them, without adding your adult perspective?
  - Have you avoided gratuitous sex, violence and profanity, but not been afraid to include those things if they are necessary, natural elements of the story?
  - Have you allowed your characters to present your theme or lesson to your readers, rather than overtly preaching to your audience?
  - Is the plot open-ended enough to allow your readers to draw their own conclusions, and think about issues beyond your story?

### *Young Adult (nonfiction)*

- All the writing tips for middle grade nonfiction, adjusted to be applicable to ages 11 and up, plus:

- Is your manuscript 80-150 pages long? Do you know of photos that can be used to illustrate the work?

- Have you built upon knowledge young adults have already acquired in school and inspired them to think about bigger issues?

- Have you kept the writing interesting and incorporated the latest information on the topic?

# READY FOR MUCH MORE?

Go to

<http://bit.ly/writtenastory>

and get instant access to the entire ebook for the special discounted price of only **\$15.95!**



And be sure to visit our new children's writing community, The CBI Clubhouse. Come to <http://cbiclubhouse.com> and hang with the Fightin' Bookworms!