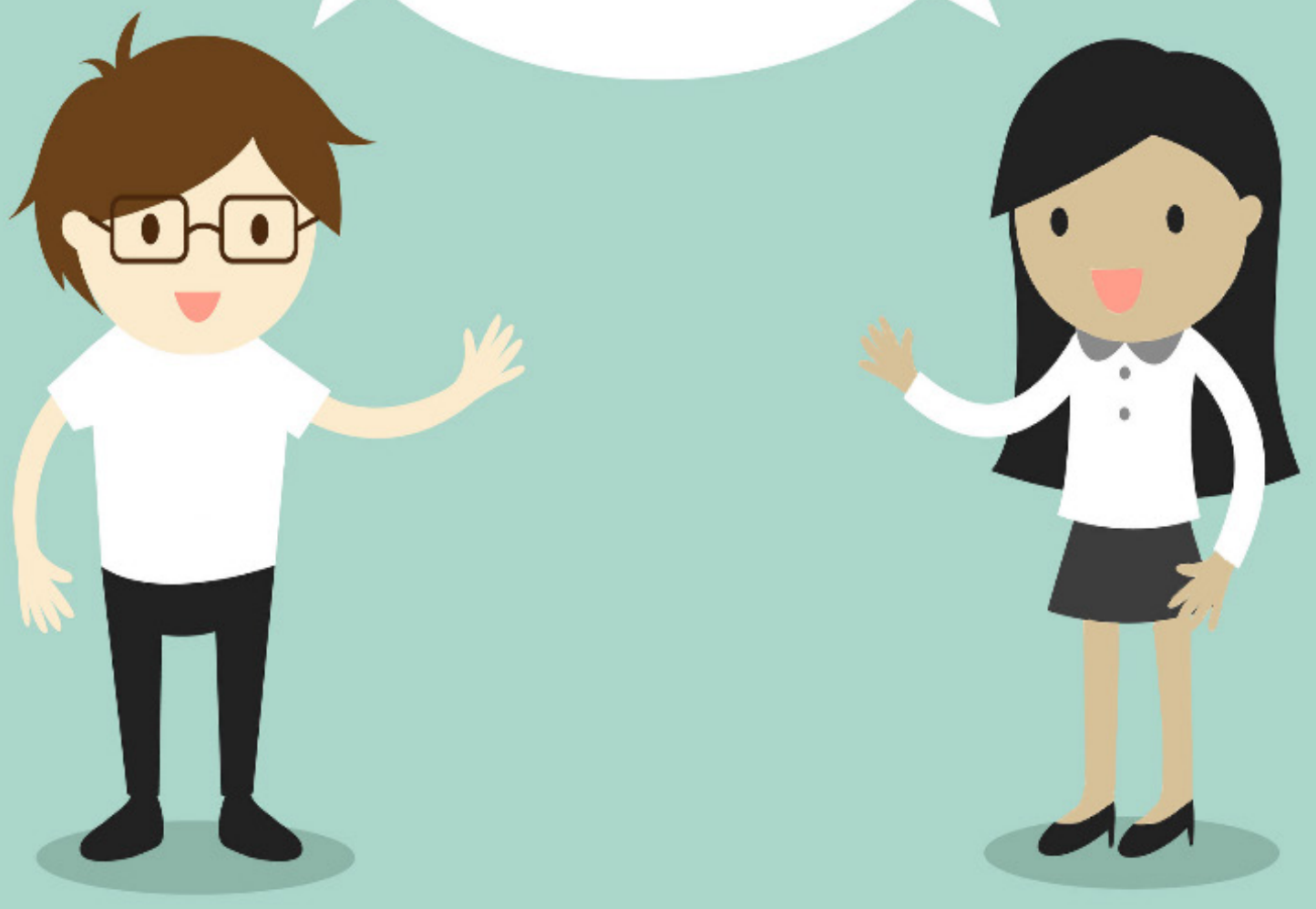
Children's Book Insider

October 2018

Crafting Dialogue that Works



PLUS: Above the Slushpile Submission Code: Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency

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This issue's contributors

Hilari Bell has written five fantasy series for middle grade and young adult readers, and five stand-alone novels (three of which as science fiction). She's currently working on a novel that mixes steam punk with fantasy. Visit her website at **http://hilaribell.com**.

Kimberly M. Hutmacher is the author of 29 books for children and teachers and 150+ articles, poems, and stories published in magazines and newsletters. To learn more about Kimberly and her books, please stop by her blog, **https://kimberlyhutmacher-writes.blogspot.com/**

Lynne Marie is the author of *Hedgehog Goes to Kindergarten* and *Hedgehog's 100th Day of School* (Scholastic), *The Star in the Christmas Play* and *Let's Eat Around the World* (Beaming Books), *Moldilocks and the 3 Scares* (Sterling) and more forthcoming, as well as numerous stories and articles in magazines, including *Highlights for Children, High Five, Baby Bug, Family Fun, Hopscotch, Turtle, Spider* and *Writer's Digest*. Her website is **http:// www.LiterallyLynneMarie.com**

Jane McBride is the author of 36 novels, numerous short stories and articles including pieces in 16 Chicken Soup for the Soul anthologies, and the CBI Managing Editor. Follow her writing blog at **http://www.janemchoate.blogspot.com**

Candice Ransom is the author of 150 books for children, including 10 *Step into Reading* titles. She has an MFA in writing for children from VCFA and an MA in children's literature from Hollins University. She currently teaches in Hollins University's graduate program in children's literature. **www.candiceransom.com**

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mail@CBIClubhouse.com
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Publisher: Laura Backes
Layout: Shellie Dougherty
Editor/Agent Spotlight Editor: Lynne Marie
Genre Spotlight: Jean Diagneau
Featured Interviews: PJ McIlvaine
Chief Operations Officer: Jon Bard

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At Presstime:

Mentorship Program for Diverse Authors and Illustrators Accepting Submissions

Beginning in October, the We Need Diverse Books™ (WNDB™) Mentorship Program will accept applications for the program's fourth consecutive year. The mission of the program is to support diverse children's writers and illustrators early in their career by pairing them with an experienced children's author or illustrator.

The following categories will award three mentorships for 2019: picture book text, middle grade fiction, and young adult fiction. In addition to the aforementioned categories, one 2019 mentorship will be awarded in MG/YA nonfiction and one for illustration. The 2019 WNDB™ mentors comprise an award-winning lineup of children's book creators including **Alex Gino, Swati Avasthi, Coe Booth, Traci Sorell, Francisco X. Stork, Robin Stevenson, JaNay Brown-Wood, Samantha Berger, Kathi Appelt, Marina Budhos, and Joyce Wan.**

Applications will open October 1st through October 31st. Applicants will be reviewed for mentorship need and readiness, and manuscripts will be evaluated by a panel of judges on elements such as craft, story, and diversity. WNDB™ mentorship recipients will be announced publicly in early 2019. Read more about the mentorship and application process go to **https://diversebooks.org/our-programs/mentorships/** For further information, contact co-chairs Miranda Paul and Meg Cannistra at **mentor@diversebooks.org**.

Contest for Unpublished Picture Books Open to Submissions

Beaming Books publishes high-quality children's books for all ages that help kids thrive in every part of who they are — emotionally, socially, and spiritually. With topics ranging from self-esteem to kindness, ethics, and faith, Beaming Books titles are designed to spark the imagination and equip kids and families to live full and flourishing lives, together. Many of their picture books have a spiritual and/or life message that is conveyed to the readers through the characters and plot (not by the author preaching or overtly teaching the reader). Recent picture book titles include *Porcupine's Pie* by Laura Renauld, illustrated by Jennie Poh (story about generosity); *May God Bless You and Keep You* by Sarah Cunningham, illustrated by Lorian Tu (rhyming story about the curiosity and wonder in a child's life); *The Star in the Christmas Play* by Lynne Marie, illustrated by Lorna Hussey (about being comfortable in your own skin).

The Beaming Books Children's Picture Book Writing Contest is an open call for picture books that support this mission. One winning picture book author will get a prize of $3,000 and a chance to have their book published by Beaming Books.

To enter, submit a brief synopsis of your book, your author bio, your contact information, and complete manuscript. Illustrations are accepted but not required. All contest submissions must be made through Submittable at **https://beamingbooks.submittable.com/submit/124333/beaming-books-picture-book-writing-contest-2018**

All submitted works must be finished, previously unpublished manuscripts of 1,000 words or less. The contest is open to new, upcoming, and established writers alike, but submissions from agents are not eligible. Entrants must be 18 or older from the United States of America. Entrants may only submit one manuscript for consideration to the contest. Previous winners are not eligible. Please read the full terms and conditions for additional guidelines.

Contest submissions are accepted through November 14, 2018. The winner will be notified by February 1, 2019.

Current Highlights Magazine Wish List for Submissions

Highlights is a general-interest magazine for children ages 6-12 that features stories, puzzles, articles, and activities. The editors are currently looking for specific topics in the categories below:

Fiction (send entire manuscript): historical fiction set during periods other than World War II; mystery stories featuring boy protagonists; humorous stories featuring girl protagonists; sports stories for younger readers featuring girl protagonists; science fiction; graphic (comic-book format) stories; stories set in countries outside the United States (does not need stories that focus on food traditions); holiday stories except for Christmas and Halloween.

All fiction should have an engaging plot, strong characterization, a specific setting, and lively language. Stories for beginning readers should have fewer than 475 words and should not seem babyish to older readers. Stories for independent readers should have fewer than 750 words and should be appealing to younger readers if read aloud. Graphic (comic-book format) stories should have fewer than 400 words. In addition, they might include ideas for panel breaks and basic art notes. Payment for fiction is $175 and up.

Verse (send entire manuscript): Short verse (up to 10 lines), especially non-rhyming and/or humorous poetry. No poems with nature or seasonal themes at this time. Payment is $40 and up.

Nonfiction (accepting queries only): "My Sci" department submissions of non-animal subjects, especially photo-based features. Queries should include the topic, the angle you plan to take, and the credentials of an expert you plan to ask for a review. Subject should lend itself well to a great photo–science "eye-candy"–to intrigue young readers. Photos do not need to be provided by the author, but the author should consider how the text might drive the choice of photo. (For example, if text about a beehive focuses on what happens inside the hive, the magazine may not be able to find the required strong, quality image of a hive's interior.) Finished piece will be 100-175 words, which includes a short introductory paragraph and four or five full-sentence image labels. Text should have a tight focus. Labels should not merely name parts of a subject but should tell about the science involved. Expert review required. (Tip: You might locate potential reviewers by contacting authors of pertinent peer-reviewed research papers.) Payment is $75 and up.

Crafts (send entire manuscript): Current needs are crafts from various cultures, games kids can make, and STEM activities. Crafts should have concise, numbered directions, up to 5 steps. Please submit step-by-step photos of a well-made sample of the craft. Craft materials should be inexpensive and easy to obtain. Crafts that celebrate holidays and religious traditions are welcome. Payment is $40 and up.

All material is submitted through Submittable at **https://highlights.submittable.com/submit/29961/highlights-magazine** Authors are encouraged to read several back issues of *Highlights* magazine (found in most libraries) before submitting.

Publisher Accepting Fiction, Nonfiction Submissions in All Age Categories

Sterling Children's Books publishes both fiction and nonfiction in the categories of board books, picture books, beginning readers, middle grade and young adult, as well as craft books, joke books, and novelty formats. Their Flash Kids imprint publishes workbooks and flash cards for preschool, elementary, and middle school students in essential curriculum areas such as reading, math, writing, test preparation, and much more. For a full list of titles, go to **https://www.sterlingpublishing.com/books/** Authors should review recent titles before submitting, to make sure their work fits the Sterling Books line and doesn't overlap with a book currently available from the publisher.

All submissions must be mailed. Submit the entire manuscript for picture books and beginning readers with a brief cover letter; or query with synopsis (for fiction) or outline (nonfiction) and sample chapter for middle grade and young adult books. Include information about yourself with particular regard to skills and qualifications in the subject area of your submission, especially for nonfiction projects, as well as publishing history if applicable. Include your name, address, telephone number, and email address in the cover or query letter. All children's book submissions should be sent to: Children's Book Editor, Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 1166 Avenue of the Americas, 17th Floor New York, NY 10036. If you want materials returned, include a self-addressed, stamped envelope of appropriate size. Response may take up to six months.

Writing Easy Readers

by Candice Ransom

In the Beginning

The sun did not shine.
It was too wet to play.
So we sat in the house
all that cold, cold, wet day.

Those are the immortal opening lines of the first easy reader, *The Cat in the Hat*. Dr. Seuss was asked to write a book that first graders could read on their own. He was required to use a word list (he used 236 different words). Published in 1957, *The Cat in the Hat* launched Beginner Books (Random House), a line of books designed to help children learn to read.

1957 also saw the debut of *Little Bear* by Else Holmelund Minarik, an *I Can Read* (Harper) title. In the 1970s, Arnold Lobel's wonderful *Frog and Toad* series snagged top prizes, including Caldecott Honor, Newbery Honor, and National Book Award finalist. Easy readers were recognized as an important, literary format, and here to stay.

My Long Road to Short Books

In the late 1990s, my Carolrhoda editor asked me to turn a historical fiction chapter book into a beginning reader for their *Own My Own History* imprint. These books weren't difficult to write. I divided compound sentences, and broke longer lines for easier reading. The interest level targeted Grades 2 to 4, with a Grade 3 reading level. Here is the first page from my *On My Own Biography*, Mother Teresa:

When Mother Teresa was a girl,
her name was Agnes Bojaxhiu.
Agnes loved market day.
She followed her mother, Drana,
around the bazaar.

While the Carolrhoda books were interesting, I loved the simple rhyming texts of Scholastic's *Rookie Readers*. After many attempts, I sold *I Like Shoes!* That short book (46 words) was so much fun to write, I wanted to do more readers. I submitted manuscripts for *Step into Reading* (Random House) for 15 years. My chance finally came in 2013 when the new editor of Step into Reading asked me to try writing a Level 1 story of a child's everyday experience. Level 1? Ack! Couldn't I start with Level 3 or 4?

The editor advised that I study the perennial-selling *Sleepy Dog* by Harriet Ziefert (1984) as an example of a simple story and lyrical text. In a word, *Sleepy Dog* is perfect. It begins:

"Time for bed,
Sleepyhead."
Sleepy, sleepy,
up to bed.
Head on pillow.
Nose under covers.
Cat on bed.

I typed out the manuscript, three tiny chapters totaling 123 words. The text's strength is its use of repetition. "Kiss me./Kiss me good./Kiss me good night." This cumulative stanza reinforces the word "kiss." Plus, it's just lovely and a far cry from, "Agnes loved market day." I circled repetitions, words that rhymed, and transitions.

I wrote three manuscripts for the editor. Two were rejected as too sophisticated and, in my own opinion, clunky and forced. *Pumpkin Day* (2015) was accepted. *Apple Picking Day* (2016) followed and I was offered a contract for three more "Day" readers. *Tooth Fairy's Night* (2017), in its third printing, established me as a *Step into Reading* author.

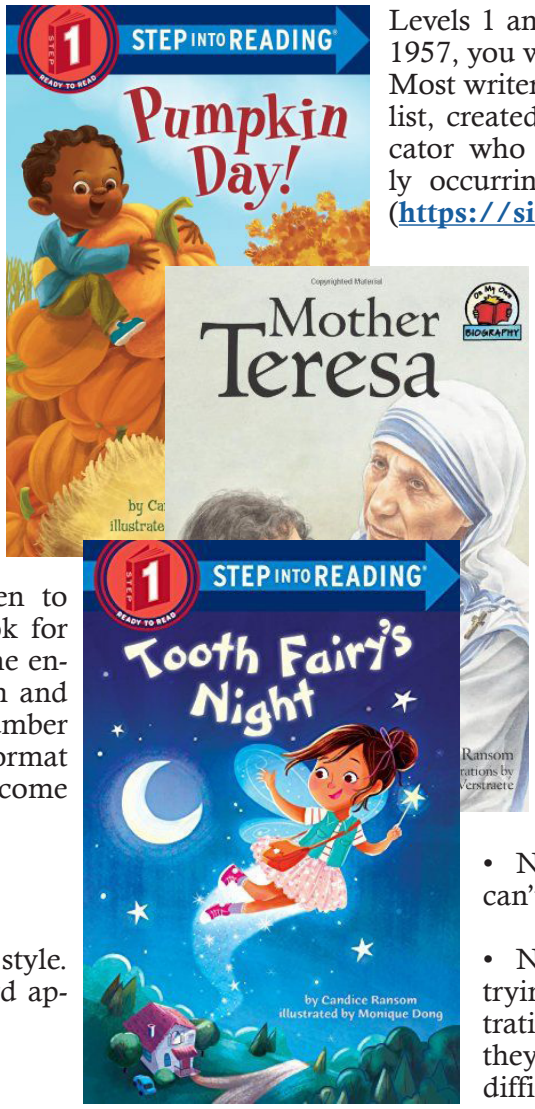
Defining the Easy Reader

Easy readers are a misnomer: they aren't easy to write (or to sell). Also called beginning or leveled readers, these books are the bridge between picture books and chapter books for newly independent readers.

To understand the easy reader picture, visit your local Barnes and Noble or large bookstore. Survey the easy reader shelves. Books are often grouped by publisher: *I Can Read* by HarperCollins, *Step into Reading* by Random House, *Ready to Read* by Simon and Schuster. DK, National Geographic, and Disney also publish readers, mostly nonfiction. Titles are further divided

by levels, usually numbers.

Levels vary from publisher to publisher. A Level 1 *Step into Reading* advertises big type, easy words, rhyme and rhythm, and picture clues. A Level 1 *I Can Read* has short sentences, familiar words, and simple concepts. A Level 1 *Ready to Read* emphasizes easy sight words, simple plots, and familiar topics. The sweet spot is Level 1 and 2, aimed at readers in pre-K and kindergarten through second grade who possess some skills. Bookstores tend to carry more early reader titles, which was why I was asked to try my hand at a Level 1.



A quick glance at the display will show a lot of licensed books: *Star Wars, Disney Princess, Shopkins, Paw Patrol, Barbie*. You'll also find easy reader spin-offs from well-known picture books, such as *Fancy Nancy, Pete the Cat,* and *Diary of a Worm*. Licensed properties are generally produced through packagers, or writers who work closely with the brand and the publishing house.

You might find editors are more open to Level 1 and Level 2 manuscripts. Look for non-licensed titles to study. Write out the entire manuscript for word count, rhythm and rhyme schemes, length of sentences, number of pages. Choose several books in a format that best suits your style. They will become your mentor texts.

Writing the Easy Reader

Your story may suit a simple narrative style. *I Love Pink!* (2017) has a straightforward approach:

> *My cat is orange.*
> *My dog is black.*
> *My hamster is brown.*
> *But my room is pink!*

I prefer the challenge of meter and rhyme. Here is the opening stanza of *Pumpkin Day*:

> *Sunny day.*
> *Pack a lunch.*
> *In the treetops*
> *squirrels munch.*

My pattern of four lines — three syllables, three syllables, four syllables, three syllables, with lines two and four rhyming — was hard to maintain. *Pumpkin Day* was like working on a puzzle, substituting this word for that one, keeping the pace moving, writing a satisfying ending.

Word choice is important, particularly for Levels 1 and 2. As Dr. Seuss did back in 1957, you will need to consult a word list. Most writers rely on the *Dolch Sight Words* list, created in the late 1930s by an educator who compiled the most frequently occurring words in children's books (**https://sightwords.com/sight-words/dolch/**). The list contains 220 "service words" plus 95 high-frequency nouns. The lists are divided into groups by grade level.

Another excellent source is the *Children's Writer's Word Book* by Alijandra Mogilner (1992). This reference book has an alphabetical list of words with it's assigned sight word grade (great for a quick check), followed by word lists from kindergarten through sixth grade.

Final Tips

- No contractions. Instead of "he can't," write "he cannot."

- No metaphors. New readers are trying to decode text. The illustrations provide visual cues when they falter on a word or two. It is difficult to illustrate — and understand — a metaphor.

- No abstracts, such as thoughts or writing about the future. In a Level 2 I'm currently revising, I had a character looking forward to an event: "He will sleep under the stars." "Will sleep" implies the future — again, difficult to illustrate.

The best part about writing easy readers? Young children have limitless imaginations and endless curiosity about the world. Although the words and structure in these books may be simple, the stories can soar.

HOW TO ANNOY READERS AND TANK YOUR SALES

by Jane McBride

Do you know someone who has an annoying habit, say chomping gum, eating with their mouth open, or interrupting others' conversations? Or maybe you have some annoying habits yourself.

Did you know that authors can also have annoying habits? Such habits may affect your sales if you have a book out. If you are as yet unpublished, these habits may prevent you from ever selling a book in the first place.

Let's take a look at some of these possible habits and see if we can eliminate them from your writing.

I call this the "How to Annoy Readers and Tank Your Sales" list:

Start your book with a bunch of backstory.* I plead guilty to this annoying habit. In my first couple of books (they didn't sell, thank goodness), I felt compelled to tell the reader what had brought the character to this point, how the character felt about it, why she felt she had to embark upon this quest or journey, and what was her favorite color. Boring. The reader (these books never made it past the assistant to the assistant editor) didn't need to know these things. If any of these chunks of information were necessary, they should have been sprinkled throughout the book rather than dumped into the first pages.

Spend the first pages of the story detailing the setting.* Gone are the days when whole scenes or even chapters were devoted to description. Today's readers don't want to wade through long passages of description. They want action, and they want it immediately. Description is like backstory: a little goes a long way.

**Both of the above habits are even more important to avoid in picture books, where every word counts.*

Introduce your main character(s) in Chapter 2 or even later. Your readers want to know who the story is about, and they want to know that up front so they can begin identifying with and caring about the protagonist. If you force the reader to wade through description or backstory before they meet the main character, they may close the book before that introduction ever takes place. Let the reader get to know the character as he or she moves through the events at the beginning of the plot. Don't tell us his backstory; tell us he's in the middle of a food fight in his middle school. Tell us that he dumps a bowl of Jello into a girl's lap. Show us how how he deals with her reaction.

(Note: In some genre fiction, such as mysteries, the first chapter may involve the antagonist commiting a crime or doing something that will cause problems for the main character. While this can work, it must be done skillfully enough so that when the reader meets the protagonist in Chapter 2, she can begin to see how the consequences of the antagonist's actions will affect the protagonist down the road.)

Have two or more main characters with names that begin with the same letter or sound alike. Have you ever read a book where the main character and her friends' names all begin with the same letter? There are Kristi, Katie, Katelyn, Kirsten, Kylie, and Kayleigh. After a page or two, you're finding it difficult to remember the MC's name, much less what she is doing and why you should care about her.

Spontaneously head-hop so that the reader doesn't know whose point of view you are in. If you're going to write from the point of view of more than one character, you need to be doing it with skillful intent, and in an age-appropriate way. You can't just shift point of view mid-paragraph and expect the reader to do the same. In children's books, one point of view is best through chapter books, and one or two alternating POVs for middle grade, changing at the chapter breaks, or by designating a section of the book to each character (such as Wonder by R.J. Palacio). Some young adult novels have three or four POV characters whose stories alternate by chapter. If you're writing in multiple viewpoints, make sure it serves your story and

How to Annoy Readers continued

that each character has a unique voice.

Genre fiction often lends itself well to two POV characters in middle grade, young adult and new adult books. I write romances and so have two POVs, the hero and the heroine. In mystery or suspense novels, the villain may also have a POV. Using two viewpoints is actually a plot device — these stories may best unfold if the reader has more of a big-picture view of the plot than either character has alone.

Use the same words over and over. Do you have pet words? One author, whose books I really like, frequently uses the word "mutter." I keep reading her work because I love her characters and her storytelling, but I groan each time I see that word. In my last book, I discovered I used the word "focus" repeatedly. Fortunately, I caught this before I turned it in and tamed my use of this word. Become aware of your pets and see if you can weed them out.

Use obscure words. I love words. All kinds of words. But obscure words that have me scratching my head and wondering if it's worth it to look the word up annoy me. Don't limit your vocabulary, but don't fill it with words that can stop the reader. If the reader can understand the word from the surrounding context, or from an illustration, then expanding a reader's vocabulary is fine. But use a light touch. When authors load up their text with obscure terms, it's clear that they're trying too hard. Let your own voice, and the voice of your characters, come through.

Use big words when a small will do. This is related to the above. Your purpose in writing is not to show off your vocabulary. Your purpose in writing is to tell a great story. If the character is lying, say so. You don't have to use prevaricate, unless it's within dialogue and it's the type of word that character would use.

Pepper every line of dialogue with dialect, jargon, etc. A writer friend has an Irish background. She writes riveting tales of historic Ireland. However, she continually uses Irish dialect (historical dialect) that has me wondering what in the heck the characters are saying to each other. A little bit of regional or historical dialect goes a long way. The same goes for professional jargon.

Have characters tell each other things that they already know. Dialogue should move the story forward or reveal character. Having one character explain something that is obvious to another character is awkward and slows down the action. Replace expository dialogue with narrative.

Use weak verbs. If your six-year-old character is walking to school, show us how he is walking. Does he amble or skip or jump over lines in the sidewalk? Strong verbs bring the action and the character to life. They add a visual and emotional layer to the movement.

Make the story's conflict trivial. Can a book's conflict be solved with one good conversation between the main characters? Does the conflict boil down to a misunderstanding? If so, rethink the conflict and come up with something that tests and tries the reader. Make it strong enough to carry an entire book. Of course, levels of conflict vary according to the age of the readers and should be appropriate.

Have characters interject, demand, mutter, growl, laugh, or sigh their remarks. One memorable line that I found in a published book was "he ejaculated the remark." That certainly put a different spin on things. I was so busy wondering how the character managed to ejaculate his words that I completely forgot what words he was ejaculating! If you can eliminate dialogue tags, do so. If you can't, "said" and "asked" are always appropriate. They don't draw attention to themselves. The occasional use of another tag is fine, but keep it occasional. Above all, don't have characters laugh or sigh or groan their remarks. It isn't possible.

Make your main character unlikable or unsympathetic. This is a biggie. If your character isn't likable, why should a reader spend his time and money reading the book? But don't confuse "likable" with "perfect". Flawed characters who work to redeem themselves are far likable than characters who never do anything wrong.

Make all your sentences the same. Consider the following: He went to the store. He bought a loaf of bread and peanut butter. He went home. He made sandwiches for himself and his brothers. Are you bored silly? Vary your sentence length and construction. Short sentences can be dramatic or emotional. Longer sentences slow the reader down and deliver more information. Don't start every sentence with your subject.

Write down to your readers. Credit your readers with intelligence and sensitivity. Writing down to them comes off as condescending. If you have a lesson or message you want to convey with your story, allow your main character to learn it through the events in the plot and how she grows and changes from solving a problem or reaching a goal. Trust your readers to apply this lesson to their own lives in ways that are relevant to them.

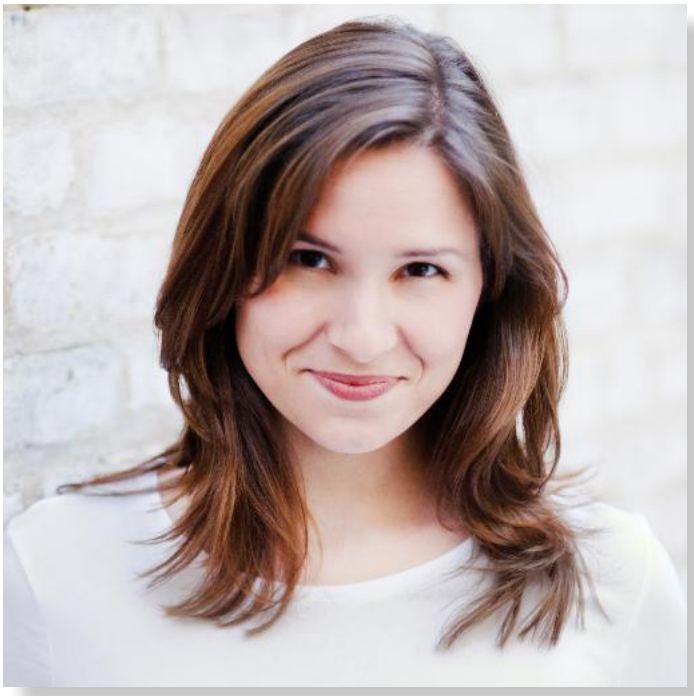
This is by no means an exhaustive list. Make up your own list of annoying habits and then purge them from your work forever.

ALEX BARBA

The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency

interview by Lynne Marie

On the heels of her recent move to the Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency, Alex Barba is here to share her thoughts with us. After beginning her literary career in story development in LA, she was a literary scout in New York, then moved to agenting with Inklings Literary before landing at JDLA. In the children's market, she specializes in Young Adult and Middle Grade novels.



LYNNE MARIE: You've recently moved to JDLA – is it business as usual or did the move bring about changes? Will you pass something along if another agent might be interested, or is a "no" from one JDLA agent a no from all?

ALEX BARBA: Thanks for having me! I got really lucky in moving to JDLA in that not only did I join a group of agents whose lists I admire and whose tastes mesh well with mine, but I also got to keep some of my favorite people as colleagues – Whitley Abell and Colleen Oefelein both joined JDLA, too!

Now that I'm settled in, it's pretty much business as usual. I'm actively looking to build my list, and with the wealth of support that JDLA offers, I'm excited to bring on new clients.

If I find a book that is so good but I'm not the right person to work on it, I'll pass it along to the other JD agents. But generally a pass from me is just that – a response from a single agent – so authors are welcome to query another JDLA agent once they hear from me. (We do ask that authors only query one JDLA agent at a time, of course.)

LM: How would you delineate target age group for MG and YA? What do you feel encompasses the differences, apart from just the age of the reader?

AB: The age of the reader is always going to be a dividing line, because different things resonate with 11-year-olds than with 16-year-olds. But when you're looking at what makes a novel MG versus YA, it's also about the mental perspective, the emotional age of the story, and the balance between external and internal conflict.

In MG, protagonists' stories mostly come from external conflicts and how they react to them. They are aware of their immediate world. They're starting to see the strings at play, to see what is pulling on their families and friends, and to understand that everything comes with consequences and not everything is as easy as black and white or right and wrong. But most of the time, those consequences are reversible or redeemable, and, with guidance from the adults in their life, they can learn from their mistakes and look forward to trying again. Self-reflection is new to kids at the MG level, so there's less internalization than you'd find in YA. What you do see tends to have a grandiose quality to it.

In YA, the protective barrier of childhood is gone. YA novels feel like a crash course in adulthood. The stakes are higher and the consequences farther reaching. YA delves deeper into characters' internal struggles and emotional growth. An effective YA novel doesn't set out to teach readers how to respond to situations or or to educate them on different parts of history; it lets teens try different hats on for size, and explore and challenge their convictions, priorities, and the world at large.

Content and themes can be darker and grittier than MG, but don't have to be. Romance runs the gamut from sweet to bad. Stakes can be as normal as ending up alone at prom, or as big as "literally everyone dies." More than anything, YA is reflective of the diverse experiences of teens in real life.

LM: How do you feel the MG genre has evolved in recent years? The YA genre?

AB: MG and YA are both expanding to showcase more diversity – diversity of identity, diversity of experience, diversity of tone and style and range. YA has become notorious for its adult readership in recent years, but we're excited to see editors pointedly focused on acquiring content that is, first and foremost, for teens!

LM: Name a MG novel that you feel is timeless and explain why you feel that way.

AB: How could the answer not be *Harry Potter*? I'm of the Harry Potter generation – those who grew up alongside Harry, Ron, and Hermione – but the reach and impact have not diminished on young readers today. My teacher friends are constantly talking about students who are "discovering" the series. Kids continue to read and fall under Hogwarts' spell. And while some of the details maybe don't quite stand up to today's level of wokeness, the series continues to offer young readers a portal through which they can begin to consider prejudice, empathy, social structures, and activism.

LM: What strengths, in particular, are you looking for in your novel submissions? What are some weaknesses you often encounter? How important is the query letter? How important are comp books?

AB: I'm looking for a strong hook (query) and an incredible voice (sample). It's hard to overstate the importance of the query letter. Too often I see authors using their query letters to explain what their book is about – how their character is "a normal kid" or "not a normal kid," how it came about that they finally decided to write it, certain themes or issues it touches on, lessons it teaches – and that's not the point. The query letter is a pitch. It's the author's chance to sell their book, so they need to entertain and make it pop against all the stuff already out there. Agents and editors receive tons of queries every day. A great query letter grabs our attention and convinces us to read on.

Comp titles aren't necessary, but we like to see them. It helps to orient, hook interest, and shows that the author has done their research and knows their market. (Side note: if you're going to write MG or YA, you have to read MG/YA. Nothing turns us off more than an author saying they don't read their market/genre or that their book is better than the drivel kids read these days. Insta-pass.) A really good comp makes me eager to read on and see how the book compares and contrasts. That said, a really unfortunate one can make it a "no" right there and then. If you're going to comp a title, there better be a clear, specific reason.

LM: What would be the ideal qualities that you are looking for in a potential client? What are your thoughts on pitching series books?

AB: When I talk to a potential client, I love to hear their vision for future books and their writing career. Most author/agent relationships start with a single book, but I want to know that we'll be working towards the same long term goals and that their next book will be something I love just as much. As an editorial agent, I like to find authors who can handle criticism and edits, and can take suggestions and really run with them. I'll point to the issues and suggest possible solutions, but the actual revisions are up to the author.

Series potential is great, but it's rarely the thing we're looking for. Agents and editors are typically looking for MG/YA series starters that can stand alone. Unless that first book sells and performs well on the market, there is no Book 2. My advice to querying authors: make notes on what might happen in Book 2, then start writing your second, unrelated book.

LM: Do you try and fill specific holes within the spectrum of books you represent, or do you just take good books as they come? Why or why not?

AB: I have a vision for what I'd like my list to be, and

certain projects in mind to add if given the chance. But right now, my list is still small enough that I can be open to any book I am passionate about.

LM: One of the questions that's on every blooming writer's mind is: Which came first, the editor or the agent? Please share your thoughts on whether you feel a writer should submit first to agents, or editors and why.

AB: It really depends on what kind of career an author wants. There's no rulebook out there that says you must have an agent and publish with a big press in order to be An Author. Some authors enjoy managing their own career and and are happy publishing with small presses. For those authors, it absolutely makes sense to submit to editors first. But for authors who want to publish with a big press, it's vital to have an agent. Big publishing imprints typically don't accept unagented submissions. This is especially true for kid lit, so if that's the path you want, querying agents first is a must.

LM: What criteria do you use to determine whether a book is commercial?

AB: A commercial book has a sellable hook (i.e. the premise can be easily condensed, and it stands out from the other hooks on the market) and the writing and voice are widely accessible and relatable.

LM: With respect to retellings, what type of stories would you love to see retold?

AB: In general, I gravitate towards "reimaginings," stories that take the core idea of the source material and make it something wholly new. I've always been a particular fan of feminist reimaginings of traditional fairy tales – you know, take the helpless princess and turn her into the hero of her own story, that sort of thing!

For more details, check Twitter page **https://twitter.com/AlexandraBarba** for realtime #MSWL updates.

Above the Slushpile

Alex Barba is accepting queries for middle grade and young adult novels. For more details on her current needs, go to **https://www.jdlit.com/alex-barba**. All submissions must be sent through Query Manager at **http://QueryMe.Online/Alex_JDLit** Paste your query letter, synopsis and the first three pages of your manuscript into the online form. In the field marked "**If this query is a referral, who referred you?**" put **Children's Book Insider**.

TIME MANAGEMENT:
TIPS AND TECHNOLOGY HELPERS

by Kimberly M. Hutmacher

Most careers require employees to show up at a certain time, perform a list of expected duties under a certain amount of supervision, take breaks/lunches as assigned, and leave at a specified time. Writing is different. We set our own work schedule and balance it with breaks and life and home activities and responsibilities. We have to be disciplined enough to devote enough time to the creative and business sides of our job, but not let ourselves get so lost in the imaginary worlds we create that we neglect the rest of our lives.

Setting a Schedule

A regular writing schedule is imperative. If you're a full-time writer, that schedule might be Monday thru Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Maybe you're a part-time writer. If you're a stay-at-home parent or work another full-time job outside of the home, your writing schedule might be 8:00 p.m.-10:00 p.m. Monday thru Friday. Whatever schedule you decide on, respect the schedule and make your friends and family respect it too.

Respecting the Schedule

Do any of these scenarios sound familiar? Your spouse asks you to run some errands for them. A friend wants you to spend the afternoon shopping with them. Your mom calls and wants to chat for an hour. All of this is fine unless it interferes with your designated work time. I don't expect my friend to leave her job in the middle of the day to go shopping with me. I wouldn't call someone at work and expect them to chat with me for an hour, and I wouldn't ask my spouse to leave his job to run a few errands for me. Make sure everyone knows your schedule and stick to it. Be prepared to defend it. If I am interrupted for anything like any of the above, I usually respond that I can't because I'm working on a deadline. This isn't a lie. Sometimes these deadlines are set by my editors, and sometimes they are self-imposed. I've responded this way enough times now that my family and friends are becoming very good at respecting my work schedule as much as I respect theirs.

Preventing Distractions with Technology

You have to respect your writing schedule, too. Put your phone on silent and turn off the television. If you have trouble staying away from email and social media, there is an app for that. There are actually several apps for that. The following describes just a handful of the technology distraction helps that are available:

SelfControl: This app allows you to set your own restrictions. You can block certain websites, email, or the entire internet. An alarm will go off when time is up. This one is just for Macs.

Freedom: This one blocks the entire internet for up to eight hours at a time. It works well if you don't need the internet to do research. It's available for Windows, Mac, and Android.

Anti-Social: This one blocks all social media, but still allows internet access. You can block sites for anywhere from 15 minutes up to 8 hours.

FocusWriter: This one blocks everything except for what you're writing. You can set goals so the app will let you know when you reach a certain word count or when you have written for a certain amount of time.

StayFocusd: This is a Google Chrome extension. It doesn't block any websites, but it restricts the amount of time you spend on them. You can set your own

Time Management continued

time limits, and once you've reached your allotted amount of time, the sites will be blocked for the rest of the day.

The List

Sometimes we have so much to do that we waste a lot of time stressing over where to begin. I've had weeks where had work-for-hire deadlines, book marketing and publicity to plan, and speaking engagements to prepare for. Don't underestimate the power of a list. You can keep a running list on a computer file or just go old school with a notebook. Make a list of everything you need to do, and be sure to include the date each needs to be completed by. Begin every work session by consulting the list. If multiple projects have to get done on the same day, prioritize what needs to get done first, and get started.

Getting started is half the battle. How we choose to use our time will absolutely determine what we will accomplish and what our level of success will be. In closing, remember to stay balanced. When your allotted writing time is over, put your work away and focus on the rest of your life. Live, love, learn, and then write again!

FocusWriter

https://gottcode.org/focuswriter/

StayFocusd

https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/stayfocusd/laankejkbhbdhmipfmgcngdelahlfoji?hl=en

SelfControl

A free Mac application to help you avoid distracting websites.

https://selfcontrolapp.com/

freedom

https://freedom.to

Anti-Social

https://antisocial.80pct.com/

Close Third Person POV Helps Wipe Out Beginner Mistakes

by Hilari Bell

When choosing a viewpoint through which to write our stories, we are most often deciding between 1st and 3rd person. And within that 3rd person point of view, we have close and distant options. There is a difference, and I've realized that writing in close 3rd person makes it harder for a writer to commit a whole host of beginner mistakes. So let's take a look at the difference between the close and distant 3rd person viewpoints, and examine how using the close 3rd person POV helps you avoid the most common narrative pitfalls.

Distant 3rd person is when you write as the author, looking at the characters' actions and recounting them from…well, a distance:

> *Kathy watched the squirrel amble down the fence toward the bird feeder. "Stupid squirrels," she muttered. The squirrel stopped and looked right at her, defiantly. She stood, and went to get her broom to chase it away.*

Close 3rd person is when you see the scene from inside the POV character's mind, heart and body:

> *The squirrel ambled down the fence toward the birdfeeder, as if the disgusting creature had every right to be there. Kathy felt as if her head were going to explode. Calm. Deep breath. "Stupid squirrels." Her voice was level, almost amused. Her anger management coach would have been proud of her. Then the squirrel stopped and looked right at her, rodent defiance in its beady eyes. Prickles of rage swept over Kathy's skin and down her forearms. Screw anger management. She stood, and went for the broom.*

Close 3rd person is always longer…but look how much more impact those extra words give you. (Yes, it's a bit overwritten, but you get the point.) **And in addition to more impact on the reader, if you're writing in close 3rd person, really inside your main character's mind and skin, you're far less likely to:**

***Suffer from POV drift.** If you're deeply into Kathy's anger and her struggle to control it, you're a lot less likely to go hopping into other character's heads, as happens in the sample below:

> *Kathy watched the squirrel amble down the fence toward the bird feeder. "Stupid squirrels," she muttered.*
> *The squirrel stopped and looked at her. Why did the big one always try to keep it from the food, it wondered. It had children to feed too.*
> *Kathy saw the squirrel looking at her, defiantly, and went to get her broom to chase it away.*

If you're deeply engaged in Kathy's anger, you won't be nearly as tempted to tell the reader what the squirrel thinks. Or to hop into the thoughts of other human characters in your scene, either.

***Have your character act (or react) without sufficient motive for her actions.**

> *Kathy watched the squirrel amble down the fence toward the bird feeder. "Stupid squirrels," she muttered. The squirrel stopped and looked right at her, defiantly. She stood, and went to the telephone to call Helen and complain about the way those squirrels wiped out a whole feeder. She could see the squirrel shoveling seed out of the feeder as she spoke. Helen said their boss was just like that squirrel, cutting the company match out of their retirement plans.*

Of course, the real reason this happens is that the author brought the squirrel into the story in the first place as a thin device to inspire Kathy to call Helen so they could grouse about the boss. But no one fighting the squirrel vs. bird feeder war would ever be able to chat calmly on the phone while their feeder was being emptied — and seeing Kathy do it feels fake to the reader. The solution to this problem, by the way, is to either have Kathy storm out, kill the squirrel with the broom (a lucky blow) and get arrested when a neighbor calls the police to report

Close Third Party POV... continued

her for violating animal rights and generally acting crazy. Kathy can then call Helen to bail her out, and on the way home the subject of the retirement plan comes up. Or, you can just forget the stupid squirrel and have Kathy call Helen to bitch about company policy.

***Have your characters say things a real person wouldn't say.**

> *Kathy watched the squirrel amble down the fence toward the bird feeder. "Pesky varmints," she muttered. The squirrel stopped and looked right at her, defiantly. She stood and went to get her broom to chase it away.*

Mind, if you give Kathy the right cultural background and voice, she could say "pesky varmints":

> *Kathy watched the squirrel amble down the fence toward her birdfeeder. "Pesky varmints," she muttered. Bob had built that feeder with his own hands, damnit, and she worked hard for the money to buy that seed! The squirrel stopped and looked right at her, sassing her. Dissing her, as the grandkids would say. Enough! She stood, and went to get her shotgun.*

Voice, which most editors and agents will tell you is the first thing they look for in a story, springs from writing so close to your POV character that the story — even in 3rd person — comes through in the character's voice instead of yours.

***Tell instead of show.** This is one of the most essential differences between close and distant 3rd person. Look at all the bits of the second paragraph that reveal Kathy's bone deep anger — an anger that could believably result in squirrelicide.

Close 3rd person example:

> *The squirrel ambled down the fence toward the birdfeeder, as if the disgusting creature had every right to be there. Kathy felt as if her head were going to explode. Calm. Deep breath. "Stupid squirrels." Her voice was level, almost amused. Her anger management coach would have been proud of her. Then the squirrel stopped and looked right at her, rodent defiance in its beady eyes. Prickles of rage swept over Kathy's skin and down her forearms. Screw anger management. She stood, and went for the broom.*

Compared to this distant 3rd person example:

> *Kathy watched the squirrel amble down the fence toward the bird feeder. "Stupid squirrels," she muttered. The squirrel stopped and looked right at her, defiantly. She stood, and went to get her broom to chase it away.*

I have to admit, when I first hit this part of the tip I was tempted to go back and modify the distant paragraph by adding, Kathy was furious. I didn't, because it would be cheating—my intention was to write distant 3rd person, not to write distant 3rd person badly. And if you're writing for any age, almost any flat statement that a character feels some basic emotion is bad writing. (There are a few exceptions, especially with beginning readers where the sentence structure and language remains simple, but even then telling statements should be few and far between.)

Notice also how much tension is generated by being able to see and feel Kathy's internal landscape. In the distant paragraph I don't feel much suspense as she goes for the broom. In the close one, given how she's feeling and what we now know about her anger issues, it's pretty clear that something bad is about to happen — without my having to resort to clumsy foreshadowing like, *Little did Kathy know that when she picked up the broom, she put in motion a train of events…*

When you come right down to it, close 3rd person is better writing than distant, on almost every level. Because if you can write the story from inside your POV character's mind and heart, your readers' minds and hearts will be engaged as well.

Making Written Dialogue Sound Like the Real Thing

by Jane McBride

Writers know that realistic dialogue is not truly realistic. It is artificial dialogue made to sound realistic. That said, what should dialogue be and not be in order to sound like the real thing?

Written dialogue should...

Be concise. Have your character say what he needs to and then stop. Use body language or action to fill in the subtext of what the speaker's saying, and to show the listener's reaction to what the character said. If your dialogue is sharp and true-to-character, it doesn't need a lot of extra words to make the point. Here's an example:

> *"What's wrong?" Mrs. Schafer asked. Jamie quickly turned away from his teacher and started tugging at the broken zipper on his backpack.*
>
> *"My mom's not here," Jamie mumbled. He kept his head down, hoping Mrs. Schafer wouldn't see his tears.*
>
> *Mrs. Schafer frowned and glanced at the line of cars in the school pick-up lane. "What kind of car does your Mom have?"*
>
> *Jamie shrugged. "A big one. And it's blue."*
>
> *Mrs. Schafer nodded. Then she smiled with all her teeth showing, as if this was something to be happy about. "Why don't you come inside while I call your mom? You can give Stanley his crickets while you're waiting."*

It's clear from Jamie's body language that he's upset his mom's late, and we understand that Mrs. Schafer feels bad for him by her offer to let him feed the class gecko. But her unconcerned smile doesn't fool Jamie. None of this needs to be communicated in the dialogue because the characters, and the readers, fill in the blanks with body language.

Be informative. Dialogue has two main purposes: to reveal character and to move the story forward. If two characters in your story are having a conversation about which coffee they prefer, it had better not just be about the coffee. Though people compare coffee all the time, it serves no purpose in a story unless it tells us something about the characters or adds something meaningful to the story line.

Be relaxed. Unless one is giving a speech or meeting the Queen of England or introducing people of vastly different stations in life, our conversation is normally relaxed and informal. We leave out words. We use hand and body gestures in place of words. We are often sloppy with our grammar. No one is judging us. There are no conversation police to correct us if we make a slip. So it is in dialogue. Conversation rambles. Dialogue does much the same thing (though not too much—more about that below).

Be choppy. People frequently don't talk in complete sentences. We use fragments. We pause in the middle of a sentence for any number of reasons, whether it be to take a breath or to emphasize something or just because we forgot what we were going to say next. We make jumps from one subject to another without so much as a segue in sight.

On the other hand, realistic dialogue should not...

Be too concise. Dialogue should be concise – that's great as far as it goes, but people and characters are not robots. They don't talk in sound bytes. They are frequently not thinking before they talk, and any number of things can and do come out of their mouths. If you have edited your dialogue until it shines like a new penny, good for you. But if you have edited out all the pauses and strictly unnecessary words, you have probably gone too far. A good tip is to read your dialogue aloud or, better yet, have a friend read it with you, both of you taking a part. Listen to the flow and rhythm of it. Are there natural pauses and places for the characters to reflect, to react?

Let's look at the above example with all the reflections, reactions and body language taken out:

Making Written Dialogue... continued

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Schafer asked.
"My mom's not here," Jamie mumbled.
"What kind of car does your Mom have?"
"A big one. And it's blue."
"Why don't you come inside while I call your mom? You can give Stanley his crickets while you're waiting."

Without the surrounding subtext, it's hard to know how Jamie and Mrs. Schafer feel about this situation, and we don't get any sense of Mrs. Schafer's sympathy for Jamie, or his embarrassment at being upset in front of his teacher.

Be too informative. Have you ever read a passage of dialogue where it seems that the character is giving a lecture on the subject in question, whether it be the White Cliffs of Dover or the proper way to train a puppy? If your character is a professor or an expert in a particular subject, that's okay. Otherwise, save the lectures and just have your characters talk in a normal fashion. Another type of too-informative dialogue is the "As you know ..." type, where one character uses dialogue to impart information to the reader that the other character would reasonably already know. In this case, the writer is trying to make dialogue so informative and detailed that he can slip information to the reader. Unfortunately the plan most often backfires as the dialogue comes off sounding unnatural and boring.

Let's eavesdrop on a mother/teenage son dialogue where the single mother is trying to get her son to get a part-time job to help out with the family finances.

"As you know, Mark, ever since your father abandoned us to go 'find himself,' things have been tight. I have two jobs, plus taking care of you and your younger sister Cindy and your little brother Justin. In addition, I have to take care of the house, make sure homework gets done, and put a meal on the table every night. Despite all this, we're not making it. As you know, we have two weeks to come up with money for the electric bill or the lights are going to be shut off."

(Mark already knows that his father has left the family to find himself. He knows what his younger sister and brother's names are. He also knows that the family is in danger of going without electricity, but Mother feels the need to remind him of all of this anyway.)

"As you know, Mom," Mark said, "I already have basketball practice three days a week, forensics twice a week, and karate every Friday night. I don't have time to take on a part-time job."

(Mother knows Mark's schedule very well. She has just written a check that bounced for the karate lessons.)

"Well, as you know, I am desperate. I can't keep all the balls in the air by myself. You are sixteen years old. You are capable of helping out."

(Mark is very aware that he is sixteen.)

Okay, that's an extreme example, but you get the idea. Find another way to reveal the character's background without artificially sticking it in the dialogue. There is one exception to this. The "as you know …" gambit can be effective if the emotional tone of the exchange is right. People who are sarcastic, angry, or just plain nasty will say things which others are perfectly aware of. This works best if the dialogue comes out in rapid-fire sentences with no pause or breaks.

Be stilted or overly self-conscious. When we think of stilted language, we normally think of excessively formal language. That can be a problem in dialogue (see below). However, stilted dialogue can result from other causes as well. The southerner who peppers her dialogue with "y'alls," the foreign-born character who never uses contradictions, the street kid whose every other word is slang or an expletive — all of these are examples of dialogue that can turn stilted if it runs amok. In such cases, a little goes a long way. If you have a southern-born character who drops the g's on all her words, do it once or twice, then revert to spelling the words properly. The reader will get the idea. The same goes for the immigrant for whom English is a second language, or any other character whose speech varies significantly from the other characters in your book. Give a taste of the character's speech and then trust the reader sufficiently to understand that the character in question will continue to speak in that way.

It should not be overly formal. I've saved the easiest for last. Most of us do not talk in a formal manner. We are comfortable with conversational shorthand that we know the listener will fill in. The same goes for dialogue in a book. Show the shorthand that your characters use. Make it unique to them. Save the perfect grammar and complete sentences for a thesis.

There is no magical formula to writing realistic sounding dialogue. The more you write, the more you will learn the techniques of doing it well. Give your characters a voice, then trust them to use it.