

# Children's Book Insider

December 2018

## How to Write 'STEM' Books



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**Natasha Wing** is a best-selling author who is known for her *Night Before* picture book series. She is currently writing joke books for Sterling Children's Books, the next title being, *Things with Wings*. And yes, there is a Natasha Wing joke in the book!

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*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. All "At Presstime" listings are current at the time of initial publication. Members are urged to verify listings past the month of publication.

# At Presstime:

## First Annual Award for Hispanic-themed Picture Book Accepting Submissions

Arte Público Press is now accepting children's book manuscripts to be considered for the inaugural Salinas de Alba Award for Latino Children's Literature. The award seeks to address the need for more culturally relevant, bilingual reading materials for Hispanic children by encouraging more authors to create for this growing audience. The award will be given on an annual basis to one manuscript for a children's picture book.

Entries should consist of a picture book manuscript for children ages 8 and under, 50-1000 words long, that reflects Hispanic culture and heritage in the story's characters, setting and/or plot. Manuscripts must be submitted by **December 31, 2018**. The selections will be submitted to a committee made up of bilingual educators, authors and reading specialists in early January, followed by the committee's recommendation on January 31. The winner will receive a \$5000 cash award, plus publication of the book under the company's Piñata Books children's book imprint with a standard royalty agreement.

Children's picture book entries should be text-only (no illustrations) and submitted in PDF format online at <https://artepublicopress.com/submissions/> (scroll down to the link for Manuscript Submission Form). Put "Salinas de Alba Award submission – TITLE OF MANUSCRIPT" in the manuscript title field. Manuscripts can be submitted in English, Spanish or bilingually. The art and design for the award-winning book will be handled by Arte Público Press.

## Agent Seeks Middle Grade and Young Adult Submissions

Masha Gunic is a Junior Agent at Azantian Literary Agency (<http://azantianlitagency.com/>) and is currently looking for new middle grade and YA clients. She's open to all genres of middle grade, including adventure, horror, historical, humor and unique contemporary stories. She especially likes dramatic and funny middle grade books with a relatable voice and strong friendship and family themes, and brave or whimsical adventure novels, especially those starring underdogs and antiheroes. In young adult fiction, she wants exciting, high-concept and commercial novels as well as unique literary works and contemporary fiction (including comedies, drama, romance, thrillers, and mysteries with satisfying twists). She's also open to historical fiction, science fiction, low fantasy, and magical realism, but not high fantasy. Above all, she's drawn to young adult novels with a strong voice, masterful writing, beautiful world-building with a vivid setting, and complex characters that are truly unforgettable. Submit through the agency submission form online at <https://querymanager.com/query/MashaGunic> with a query letter, synopsis, and the first 10 pages.

## New Imprint Seeks Picture Books with Social, Environmental and Religious Themes

Flyaway Books is a new picture book imprint of Westminster John Knox Press. Featuring debut as well as established authors, all titles are intentionally multicultural in their artwork and characters. For current titles, go to <https://www.flyawaybooks.com/>

Seeking picture books for children up to 10 years old that reflect themes of diversity, inclusivity, self-esteem, kindness, compassion, care for the environment, social/emotional challenges for children and families, and social justice/contemporary issues. These would be appropriate for a general trade market and found in bookstores, libraries, and public and private schools. Also open to manuscripts appropriate for religious schools, churches (primarily mainline Protestant, progressive evangelical, and emergent), and families that value faith both inside and outside of a church setting. These include retellings of stories from the Bible, stories about religious characters or seasons, and contemporary stories with religious themes.

Authors should submit a complete manuscript, along with information about the intended audience, age level, biographical information, previous publications, and relevant promotional activities you engage in, such as school visits, speaking events, blogging, etc. Author/Illustrators can submit a picture book dummy that includes text and art. Prefers to receive dummies via a link rather than a large attached file. Email manuscript submissions and dummy links to [submissions@flyawaybooks.com](mailto:submissions@flyawaybooks.com). Responds in about 8 weeks if the submission is a good match for Flyaway Books. If you receive no response after this time, you can assume the submission is not a good fit for the publisher.

### Mentorship Opportunities for Aspiring Picture Books Authors and Illustrators

Writing with the Stars is an opportunity for aspiring picture book writers and illustrators to win a free, three-month mentorship with a published author or author/illustrator. Mentors will help mentees further develop their craft and share invaluable advice and insight into the publishing world. The mentors are offering their knowledge and are NOT offering access to their agents or any editors. Contestants may pick three mentors out of the group to apply to. The mentors will evaluate each application and pick one mentee to work with. Once selected, each mentor/mentee team will work out their own methods of working together, frequency, etc. Mentorship dates are February 1-April 30, 2019. Applicants should be career-focused writers/illustrators, actively working toward traditional publication with three to four complete PB manuscripts, dummies or an online portfolio. The applicants must be un-agented and not previously published (self-publishing is OK only if your intent is to pursue traditional publishing going forward. Applicants may have previously published in magazines.) The application window will be open from **January 9, 2019 through midnight on January 13, 2019 EST**. The 2019 mentors and updated rules are posted at <http://beckytarabooks.com/wwts-contest/>

### Middle Grade Magazine on World Cultures Seeks Fiction, Nonfiction

*Faces* is a world cultures and geography magazine for ages 9-14. Seeking lively, original approaches to the subject using primary resources and up-to-date scholarly research. All material must relate to the theme of a specific upcoming edition in order to be considered. *Faces* purchases all rights to material.

- **Feature Articles** (700–800 words) include in-depth nonfiction highlighting an aspect of the featured culture, interviews, and personal accounts.
- **Supplemental Nonfiction** (300–600 words) includes subjects directly and indirectly related to the theme. Editors like little-known information but encourage writers not to overlook the obvious.
- **Fiction** (up to 800 words) includes retold legends, folktales, stories, and original plays from around the world.
- **Activities** (up to 700 words) include crafts, games, recipes, projects, etc., which children can do either alone or with adult supervision. Should be accompanied by sketches and description of how activity relates to theme.
- **Puzzles and Games** include word puzzles using the vocabulary of the edition's theme, and mazes and picture puzzles that relate to the theme (no crossword puzzles).

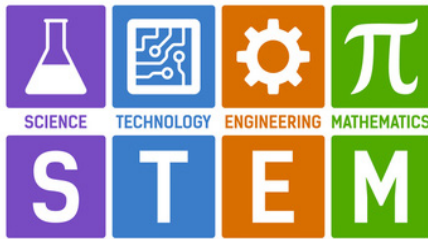
Send a query letter for each idea (multiple queries may be submitted at the same time for several ideas), that includes a brief cover letter stating the subject and word length of the proposed article; a detailed one-page outline explaining the information to be presented in the article; an extensive bibliography of materials the author intends to use in preparing the article; and a 2-3 sentence author biography. Writers new to *Faces* should send a writing sample with the query. Include your complete address as well as an email address and telephone number. Email queries to: [faces@cricketmedia.com](mailto:faces@cricketmedia.com).

Upcoming themes and query deadlines can be found at: <http://cricketmedia.com/faces-submission-guidelines>

### Publisher Seeks Experienced Nonfiction Writers for Work-for-Hire Assignments

Capstone Publishers creates engaging, accessible, series nonfiction books for grades K-8. Covering both curriculum-focused and high-interest topics, Capstone Press titles are fun, informative, accessible, and appropriate. These books celebrate and represent diversity by allowing all kids to see themselves in the pages. Capstone Press also supports struggling and reluctant readers with controlled word counts and vocabularies, leveled text, key back matter and strong photo-text matching. Popular brands include *Graphic Library*, *You Choose* and *Max Axiom*. For a list of current titles and series, go to <http://www.capstonepub.com/library/books/>

Currently seeking authors interested in work-for-hire assignments (paid a flat fee with no royalties), especially authors from marginalized backgrounds, for nonfiction on a variety of topics for kindergarten through 8th grade readers. Send a cover letter with previous publishing credits, topics of interest, and 2-3 writing samples in the genres or topics you wish to write to Eliza Leahy, Editor, Capstone Publishers, at [eleahy@capstonepub.com](mailto:eleahy@capstonepub.com). Responds only if your application meets their needs.



# Books for All Ages

by Jean Daigneau

Unless you've been living under a rock, you should be familiar with the term STEM. As children's writers, it's imperative to keep up with what's happening in the world as it affects kids. STEM education's effect on writing, "is a trend that isn't going away," according to G. P. Putnam's Sons' editor Stephanie Pitts.

STEM stands for science, technology, engineering, and math. But you'll also hear the terms STEAM, which incorporates art, and STREAM, which is promoted by some schools to include religion. For the sake of brevity, I'll focus on STEM, but it's likely STEAM and STREAM aren't far behind.

## What Makes STEM Stand Apart?

There are several characteristics that have emerged regarding the STEM movement, according to a study published in 2014 by the American Society for Engineering Education:

- The number of schools offering STEM labeled program is rapidly increasing.
- States are creating STEM initiatives.
- STEM resources available online are expanding dramatically.
- Universities are developing STEM education degree programs at all levels.

While recent trends have shown an uptick in interest in nonfiction books, it should come as no surprise that editors are also focusing on STEM topics. Pitts looks "for a high level of insight into the subject as well as engaging writing and clarity of expression...to make sometimes complex subjects easy to understand."

But STEM can also take writing in a new direction. In author Stacy McAnulty's STEM books, "humans aren't the stars of the show." While she acknowledges the importance of interesting biographies and history books, she wants "the reader to be excited by the subject matter" and not just be inspired to be "the next Einstein or Sally Ride."

Some concepts ring true for nonfiction as well as STEM books. The writing must be engaging. It must be presented in a creative way. It must encourage kids to think beyond science or math stereotypes. Which begs the next question.

## Isn't STEM Just Nonfiction in Sheep's Clothing?

While STEM and nonfiction topics are similar, STEM writing can be thought of as nonfiction on steroids. STEM lessons help students with different learning styles engage in topics relevant today, but that will also propel the world into the future. Hands-on activities and subject matter that piques a reader's interest go a long way to meeting that end and help kids think about real world solutions to today's problems.

So ramping up your reader's curiosity is always a good thing. One way to look at it is this. A book about engineering will always appeal to certain kids. A STEM book on engineering might approach the subject by including information on critical thinking, higher math skills, attention to detail, problem solving, design and technology, and even leadership and teamwork.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, STEM-related jobs are set to increase by over 9 million between 2012 and 2022. With so much focus on STEM issues, it only makes sense to consider that angle when writing for today's — and tomorrow's — markets.

## STEM and Fiction: How Does that Work?

While many STEM books focus on nonfiction topics, STEM fiction can reach out to any age level as well. For author Michelle Houts, who's *Lucy's Lab* books address STEM topics, the approach is to choose a topic first and then blend facts with story. Houts uses "current science textbooks to learn just how much depth the students are exposed to for each topic."

While she initially set out to write for the middle grade market, her work with second graders at the time revealed that "many girls have formed opinions about science, math, and technology well before age twelve." She realized that "by seven and eight years old, many girls have bought into a cultural stereotype that science

*STEM Books for All Ages continued*

is for boys, that they should be squeamish and afraid around certain animals, and that math is difficult.” Given that studies today still show fewer women in STEM careers, anything we can do to inspire all kids to consider these fields is a win-win.

When it comes to STEM fiction, McAnulty is “concerned with character and plot first” and then works on “weaving in the STEM themes.” Her book, *The Miscalculations of Lightning Girl*, is “full of math and numbers” that focuses on a character that’s struck by lightning which gives her genius level math skills. Kirkus describes it as 1 math genius + 1 year of middle school = problems even the most gifted mind can’t anticipate. What’s not to love?

### To Market to Market

Because of the interest in STEM books, not just by young readers, but by their parents and teachers as well, the market for STEM writing is strong and should remain so for years. And, McAnulty’s experience shows that besides parents and educators, “book buyers want to expose young readers to science and technology.”

Her approach to marketing STEM manuscripts is to show that “when we label something STEM, we’re saying this is entertaining and might blow your mind.” While she never purposely sets out to write a book for the STEM market, typically that’s how it’s happened. While doing research for a picture book, she says she “stumbled across some information that made me say, ‘Wow! This is totally cool.’ ” She adds that “young readers are looking for the same Wow! moment in the books they select and read.”

For Houts, STEM is a way for her agent to market her books, but “It’s not enough to just chase a popular trend. Timeliness, paired with great characters, a compelling plot and a nice dose of humor all work together to make a book a hit with readers.” Adding STEM is another way to up the notch a little against the competition.

Pitts says one of the biggest issues she finds for rejecting a STEM manuscript is that “the topic might seem too niche, so the market for the book might seem too small.” She also notes that these books need to stand out in crowded markets, especially if there is too much direct competition for the book, which is another reason that she might pass.

### Where Do We Go from Here?

As noted, all indicators point to longevity for STEM books. McAnulty points out that “as technology im-

proves, we are learning more and more in every area of science.” While dinosaur books have been popular for years, she notes that scientists are finding new species every day and discovering new ways to analyze what they’ve found.

What helps define a great topic — STEM or otherwise — is the level of excitement that you, the writer, feel about it. Hopefully, you’ve experienced that “ah-ha” moment when you find even one unusual fact that urges you to find out more, to get totally immersed in the topic, and then to want to share what you’ve learned with readers. If your critique partners get glassy-eyed when you talk about your latest STEM project, I’d say you’re there.

As you’ve read here before, good writing is key. Pitts says that besides a high-interest topic, a manuscript must have “commercial appeal beyond the school and library market.” What she wants to see is “novel approaches to subjects, and great writing. The text has to be fun and engaging in addition to informative. As with all submissions, I like to be surprised and delighted.”

It’s what we all should hope for when we visualize a new idea. And it’s certainly the reaction we hope our readers will experience as well.

## Suggested Titles:

As you’ll see from the breadth and depth of topics and age levels, there are no limits when it comes to STEM writing. So, let your imaginations soar.

*Baby University* books, by Chris Ferrie (topics are as diverse as ABC’s of Biology and Quantum Entanglement for Babies)

*3D Printing: The Revolution in Personalized Manufacturing*, by Melissa Koch

*Swimming with Sharks: The Daring Discoveries of Eugenie Clark*, by Heather Lang

*Ada Twist, Scientist*, by Andrea Beaty

*The Book of Chocolate: The Amazing Story of the World’s Favorite Candy*, by H. P. Newquist

*Cao Chong Weighs an Elephant*, by Songju Ma Daermicke

*The Friendship Experiment*, by Erin Teagan

*Girls Who Code: Learn to Code and Change the World*, by Reshma Saujani

# Add Kid-Appeal to Your Books with Puns, Jokes and Riddles

by Natasha Wing

**H**ow do you make your writing appeal to kids in second through fifth grade? With humor.

According to [KidsHealth](#) blog, at around age 6 or 7 kids start to understand language well enough to know that words can have two (or more) meanings. “As your child develops this cognitive ability to grasp different meanings, riddles, jokes, and puns start making sense and will be a top source of enjoyment for the next 3 or 4 years.”

Yet humor is such a hard thing to make universal since people have different responses to what is funny. And if you’re writing for kids, their world experience and exposure to pop culture is limited, so what you find funny they might scratch their heads at.

My picture book, *Bagel In Love*, is filled with puns. A pun is a joke exploiting words that sound alike but have different meanings. A double entendre. For example, stake and steak.

When *Bagel In Love* was being shopped around eons ago, editors kept rejecting it with the feedback that it felt like a one-note joke book. Is the humor too old for this age? they’d ask. Where’s the story?

And they were right. I was too caught up in my cleverness of coming up with bakery puns that I left out the heart in the story. Humor without heart is not enough to carry a book. Kids may read it once for the jokes, but will read it over and over again for the emotional impact.

Fast forward about 12 years later. I revised my manuscript, adding more plot and taking out jokes about that seemed too grown-up. I then sent it to an editor at Sterling who had seen it earlier. This time she took the manuscript — she loved the sense of humor! But in the revisions, it was the emotional story that we worked

on to make it stronger. I didn’t lose the humor, but I did gain a heart-warming story with a sweet ending.

Other examples of picture books with lots of humor are the *Lady Pancake & Sir French Toast* books by Josh Funk, illustrated by Brendan Kearney. Mission Defrostable has rhyming text plus puns, funny names of characters like Baron von Waffle, and a silly setting — the refrigerator! Another punny, food-based rhyming book is *Donuts: The Hole Story* by David W. Miles. If you’re a writer who likes to write in rhyme, I’d check these books out.

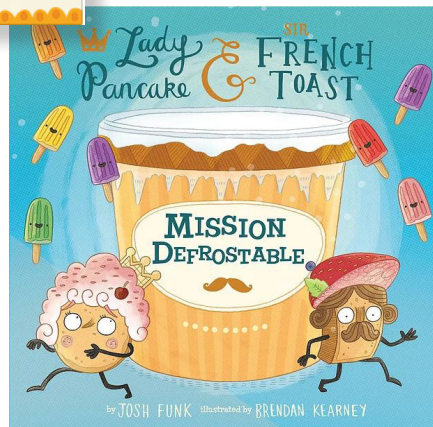
Meanwhile, back at the bakery.... After getting a good response from *Bagel In Love*, it boosted my confidence. My humor worked! I noticed that Sterling also published joke books and approached my editor with an idea. What if I wrote a joke book based on food jokes? I mean, what could be so hard about that after writing a bunch of baked goods puns for *Bagel In Love*?

Sterling accepted my idea. Yay! However, I’d have to come up with 600 jokes. No problem, I thought. I’d already been jotting some as they came to me and it was something my brain was thoroughly enjoying. With a joke book you don’t have to worry about plot or character develop-

ment or heart. You just have to be funny. No pressure, right?

I was off to the races and the first one hundred, two hundred, three hundred jokes came fairly easily. Then I hit the wall. How was I going to come up with another 300 jokes?

In the contract it stated that the work had to be origi-



## Add Kid-Appeal to Your Books continued

nal. It's very difficult to find the origin of jokes. How many times have we heard chicken-crossing-the-road jokes? And who the heck came up with the first one? So I did a search regarding copyrighting jokes and learned:

1). U.S. copyright laws require that an item must be original and fixed in some tangible form to be eligible for copyright protection, so jokes that are only uttered verbally are ineligible for copyright. However, written jokes can be copyrighted in some circumstances.

2). You won't be able to copyright a minor variation of someone else's joke, and generalized humorous observations might not be eligible for copyright protection.

3) The fair-use exception to copyright laws allows short excerpts of copyrighted items to be used for educational use, as well as for parody. Because many jokes are short, this poses a problem. A comedian, for example, could perform a comedy routine parodying your joke without being subject to claims of copyright infringement. For this reason, it's wise to copyright only longer jokes such as humorous essays or collections of jokes.

So I searched for jokes online that either fell into the "general humorous observation" category or did not indicate they'd been taken from copyrighted material and used them as inspiration for creating new jokes based on food. Check out [www.jokes4us.com](http://www.jokes4us.com) for jokes broken into topics. *Safe Search Kids* has funny jokes for kids written by kids. Or there's *Great Clean Jokes*.

Here's an insight into how my brain plays with language and images to come up with a joke:

Take a *table* for instance. I first think about its parts: top, legs, feet. Its purpose: eat off of it, hold things, put a glass on it. Then I think of other things that have the word table in it — *water table*, *Table Bluff*, *periodic table* — and then play with rhyming words like *unstable table*, *cable*, *fable*. Eventually through association and imagery, a joke comes:

What has four legs but can't walk?  
A table!

With tongue twisters I found one way to trip people up

is to include a "tw" word before a "tr" word. It's hard to get your mouth to cooperate! Try to say this three times fast:

Trudie took three Twinkie treats.

You don't have to stick with the expected one-liners, tongue twisters and knock-knocks. Be creative and that alone will spark a tone of humor in your book. In *Lettuce Laugh: 600 Corny Jokes About Food*, I came up with other joke vehicles to fill out the 600 count. I put together lists of Best Self-Help Books and fabricated funny book titles. For example:

Best Self-Help Books for Eggs:

How to Come Out of Your Shell  
How to Prepare an Egg-it Plan  
How to Tell Yokes and Crack People Up

I also came up with Shopping Lists. For cannibals the shopping list contained grocery items with names of real body parts, like:

Fingerling potatoes  
Leg of lamb  
Artichoke hearts

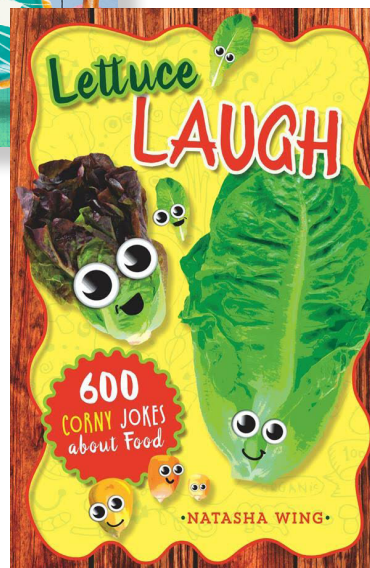
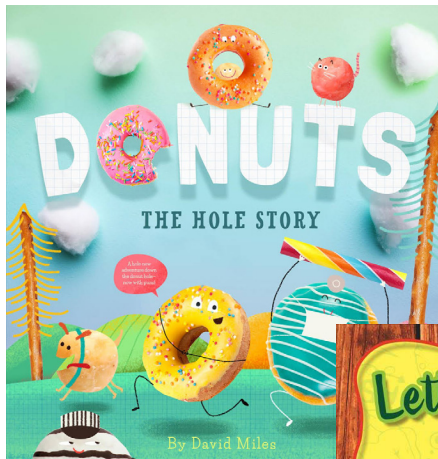
Joke books serve an important purpose in developing young readers — they expand their language base and model a sense of humor.

According to KidsHealth, having a sense of humor is not just about being funny. "The ability to see and understand humor is increasingly important

as kids move into school. As early as preschool, those with a strong sense of humor are better liked by their peers, and have more friends, higher self-esteem, and a more positive outlook on life. They're better able to deal with their own quirks and are more tolerant of others.

Most important, kids who can smile at their own mistakes are better equipped to handle teasing, bullies, and the adversities of childhood, both big and small."

And that's no laughing matter!





# AUTHOR TURNS CHILDHOOD LOVE OF WRITING INTO DEBUT MIDDLE GRADE NOVEL

interview by PJ McIlvaine

Unlike the Eagles' infamous "Hotel California", *The Hotel Between* (Simon & Schuster For Young Readers, August 2018), is a tad more hospitable, but it too holds secrets and mystery not unlike the magic key debut middle grade author Sean Easley wrote about in third grade. After years of being an educator and mentor, Sean is now able to pursue his dream of writing far-flung adventures full time, making his home in Texas with his wife and son. Oh, and if you really want to impress Sean, give him a corn dog. You can learn other amazing things about Sean at his website <https://www.seaneasley.com>.

**PJ McIlvaine:** Did you always want to be a writer? Do you remember the first thing you ever wrote, in terms of story? What books made the most impression on you growing up?

**Sean Easley:** I discovered my love of writing in grade school, when I was an extremely ADHD kid that teachers didn't know what to do with. Up until third grade I was a mess — always in trouble, falling out of my chair in class, generally disruptive, that kind of thing. But my third grade teacher Mrs. Weeks figured out that the biggest reason I was always in trouble was just that I was bored. I'd finish my work in class before everyone else and then sit there with nothing to do. She laminated a list of writing projects to my desk, and I found I really enjoyed them!

The first story I ever wrote on my own was for her, and it was about a boy named Brandon who finds a magic key on a beach (it's interesting that a couple decades later my debut includes a magic key).

As for books I loved, I devoured John Bellairs' books as a kid. *The House with a Clock in Its Walls*, *Curse of the Blue Figurine*, and with those I read the *Scary Stories to Read in the Dark* series. And then, when I found Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* series, I knew that this was something I wanted to do.

**PM:** How were you inspired to write *The Hotel Between*? How long did the first draft take? Are you an

outliner or a pantser? Do you edit as you write or wait until you have a completed first draft?

**SE:** *The Hotel Between* largely came out of a mashup of a few different dreams I've had over the years, and grew from there. The first decent draft took me about four months.

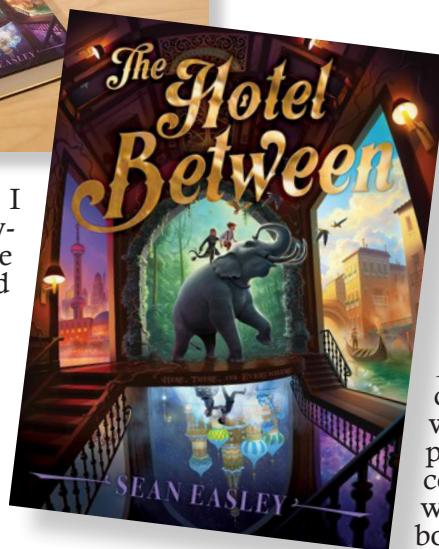
That said, I tend to write a fast draft before I write my "first" draft. The fast draft takes me about a month, and it's a bizarre fever dream of ideas and disconnected scenes that I think would be cool. That draft then becomes my outline that I work from to develop the first actual draft that I can build from. Then I tend to edit in waves, going through the manuscript over and over and over, each time honing the story structure until I'm ready to get into the nitty-gritty line edits.

**PM:** How did you get your agent? Was it a lengthy process? Once you secured representation, did you go through an editorial round with your agent? What was the submission process like?

**SE:** I landed my first agent through the tried and true query/slush pile process. I'd queried one of the bigger names at the agency twice before, and gotten full requests that had eventually resulted in passes, but with the open invitation to query again. On the third query (which was for *The Hotel Between*), I ended up with a call from a junior agent who was serving as the more experienced agent's assistant. I could not have been happier with her — she hadn't sold a book before mine, but she was amazing and had the benefit

of being surrounded by experience and wisdom. She sold my book to Simon & Schuster, for which I will always be intensely grateful.

That agent isn't my agent anymore, but it's not because of any issues we had (we're still friends!). She moved out of agenting and left me in the wonderful, brilliant



*Sean Easley Interview continued*

hands of my current agent, who sold my second book and hopefully more as we continue forward!

**PM:** Once you had a publisher on board, did the novel go through another round of edits? What was that process like? Were there some notes you pushed back on? How much input did you have in choosing an illustrator for the cover?

**SE:** One of the greatest benefits of publishing through a Big 5 house is the editor who works with you. You want to be edited, because that's what takes a story that's great for you and turns it into a story that's great for so many more people. My editor is wonderful, and she picked my book because she loved it and wanted to see it succeed. The very fact of having someone working with you who wants to see you succeed as much as you want to succeed is life changing.

I wouldn't say that there were notes that I "pushed back" on, but rather there were aspects of the vision that we had to discuss and get on the same page on. Your editor is not an adversary—she's an ally—and that means it is important to listen to and trust her wisdom (even when it's hard to hear).

As for the cover, I didn't have input, and I'm so very glad for that. If I'd stuck to my vision for the cover, I think the audience would have been much more narrow than what we ended up with. Petur Antonsson (the illustrator) is utterly brilliant, and his covers are complete works of art. I can't wait to see what he and our cover designer have in store for book two!!

**PM:** I understand you've been a Pitch Wars mentee and in 2018, you also were a Pitch Wars mentor. What was each experience like? Was it more difficult that you had anticipated?

**SE:** I loved being a Pitch Wars mentee in 2015. It connected me with incredible people, and gave me a huge support system — people who are still great friends. My 2015 Pitch Wars book wasn't the one that landed my agent, but I believe that the benefits of that experience really pushed me forward and gave me a lot of what I needed to make this book happen!

After that and before I re-joined Pitch Wars as a mentor in 2018, I also mentored for Author Mentor Match. I've always been a mentoring type personality—I love taking the things I've learned and sharing them, despite the fact that I often don't know exactly what I should be sharing. My mentee from Author Mentor Match has a wonderful agent now (I suspect it won't be long before we hear some exciting news on that front), and my current Pitch Wars mentee has written an incredible book that she's working furiously on to get it ready for this year's agent round.

Yes, it's a lot of work, but it's so so SO worth it in every way. The community, the ability to give back, the awesome opportunity to read so many amazing stories and cheer the writing community on... it makes my Hufflepuff heart full.

**PM:** Do you have a writing routine? Do you write every day or only when inspiration strikes? Do you juggle multiple projects? As a kid, you had extreme ADHD, is that still the case and do you find yourself easily bored now?

**SE:** I work every weekday from around 6:30am to 4pm. And yes, I do still have ADHD, but the nice thing about being an author with ADHD is that I can often recognize when a reader will start getting bored (because I'm getting bored) and I can adjust accordingly.

And I think that's the key for me and my ADHD. My brain doesn't like sticking with one thing over an extended period, so I've instead learned to switch tracks every so often and that keeps me engaged. Whether that means doing a different task (like social media) or moving to a different scene in the story, there's always something new around the corner. That's especially true once a book is out—there are SO VERY MANY new challenges lying around every corner that it's impossible to get bored.

**PM:** The querying/publishing process can be slow and tedious. What tips or tricks did you use to keep yourself engaged and hopeful? And what advice would you give aspiring writers now?

**SE:** Always be working on the next thing. Don't finish a story and wait — finish one story and start the next. The publishing process operates on momentum. If you stop the train, or get off, it's very hard to get it moving again.

Also, one of the most helpful skills I learned along the way was how to recognize the value of rejection. It reminds me of that old movie *What About Bob?* At one point the title character is asked how he can keep going when people don't like him or something like that, and his response is that he treats people like telephones, and if someone doesn't like him that telephone is out of order and he'll just try again later.

That's true of querying too, I think. Just because they didn't think they could sell that one manuscript you sent doesn't mean they'll feel the same about the next. And each project is a new opportunity to learn and grow and find that right balance.

**PM:** What are you presently working on? Would you like to cross over into other genres?

**SE:** Right now I'm editing the second book in *The Hotel Between* series, *The Key of Lost Things*. And there are so many things I'd like to write that it'd be very hard to box that in.

**PM:** If you could enter a *Hotel Between*, where would you like to go?

**SE:** The *Hotel* itself is so full of wonder for me I don't know that I'd want to leave!

# Writing for the Library Market: A School Librarian's Insider's Tips

by Pat Miller

**S**chool librarians have an edge over other writers. They know what kids read, what parents buy, and what the curriculum requires. Best of all, they know where the “holes” are in the collection that need someone to write a book.

I was a school librarian for 22 years. My inside track helped me sell 20 professional titles, two games, 200 magazine articles, and several children’s books. Fortunately, I’m happy to share my insider information with you.

My best suggestion is that you befriend your local school librarian. Choose the school age for which you write. Make an appointment, bring a treat, and ask them to share the needs they have found in their work with children, books, and curriculum.

Even better, volunteer to help in the library. Librarians never have enough time. Give them your help, save them some time, and build good will. In return, librarians are often happy to share their expertise.

Until you’ve nurtured that relationship, let me share some librarian secrets with you.

**1. School librarians know what makes a well-crafted book.** Library budgets are never large enough. In schools today, the library budget must stretch to pay for so many non-book items — robotics, 3-D printers, makerspaces, media, technology — that the books that are purchased must be worthy of the expenditure. There is only money for the best.

Librarians read book reviews in professional library journals. They read the reviews with the eyes of their readers, their teachers, and the curriculum. In case funds turn up, they always have a wish list and student requests take priority. They don’t usually buy self-published books. Just for fun, many of them predict the annual medal winners in advance.

**If you don’t know a school librarian:** Once you know

a school librarian, you can ask to read the reviews from her copies of *School Library Journal* or *Hornbook*. Until then, you may be able to talk to your public librarian. She is likely to have *Library Journal* which will have a section on children’s book reviews. Or check out a stack of new books from your public library and look them up in Amazon. If you scroll down, you will find “Editorial Reviews.” Often SLJ’s review is included. Popular books will have many more reviews from professional magazines and major newspapers.

**2. School librarians know what their patrons like to read.** This includes four-year-olds through fifth or sixth graders. They can see the invisible path in the carpet that leads to the dog books and the drawing books. They know which kids crave biographies and science, and which succeed best with series. They can hand sell a book to a child because they know many of their students personally and can tailor their impromptu book talks to each.

They read widely, and if they love your book, they will include it in their lessons and introduce children to it. Books are memorable to librarians if they resonate emotionally, have humor, satisfy curiosity, or have a pace or subject matter that draws the most reluctant reader in. And if they can link it to the curriculum, your book is golden!

School librarians also know what kids don’t like to read. Hopefully by the time a manuscript has made it past a critique group, an agent, and an editor, the book will be a winner. However, a librarian is the adult reader in closest touch with the child reader. She knows they can be fickle and swayed by their peers. She knows that her opinion and that of the teacher often turns kids on to good books. You want to know what she knows!

**If you don’t know a school librarian:** Look at winners of book lists voted on by children. Usually adults (most often school librarians) select the short list of 20 or so books. Children read a certain number of

them in order to vote. Two children's choice awards are the Texas Bluebonnet Award or Maine's Chickadee Award. Search by state name + "children's choice award" to find other state awards. Children's Book Choices are sponsored by the Children's Book Council. Get a feel for what children like by reading the winners.

**3. School librarians know curriculum.** It may surprise you to learn that librarians teach every child in the school. The book business is the smallest part of their job. They dovetail their lessons with those of teachers, often planning collaboratively with them. They also teach technology and library skills.

They know the curriculum at each grade level because their lessons reflect it. They also purchase books that support it. They know reading levels and supply classrooms with books for their curriculum topics. They buy books requested by teachers.

Knowing the curriculum is another way that helps their writing hit the bullseye with publishers in the school and library market.

**If you don't know a school librarian:** You can often find subject matter for your books, especially if they are nonfiction, by looking at online state educational standards. Here are three of the larger state's standards. For the others, search for "\_\_\_\_ [state] educational standards." All of these will give you an idea of what is taught.

[California Content Standards](#)  
[Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills](#)  
[New York Standard Educational Standards](#)

**4. They know what parents buy.** Most school librarians host book fairs once or twice a year. They often help cashier the sale and see what parents buy. They call in restock orders, so they know which titles sell.

Librarians are often consulted when a parent or grandparent wants to buy a book for their child. Given the age, interests, and reading ability of a child, most good librarians can name several titles that may please the child. Many are parents or grandparents themselves and buy books for their own families.

**If you don't know a school librarian:** Homeschooling parents buy a lot of books. And they post lists of their favorites. Search for "best books for homeschool

children." You can also look to the New York Times bestseller lists for children's books by ages. Their lists are based on book sales made to parents, grandparents, teachers, and other adults.

**5. They know what books need to be written.** Because children and teachers ask them for titles, librarians know where the "holes" are. Kindergarten teachers asked me for a book when their curriculum expected children to make New Year's resolutions. I searched our collection, the catalogs of our school district and local public libraries, and the database of our library book jobber. I discovered many books explaining New Year's Day, but none about how to write a resolution. So--I wrote one! *Squirrel's New Year's Resolution* was published by Albert Whitman and it was with great pleasure that I offered it to my teachers the following January.

Other book sales stemmed directly from my needs as a library teacher. I did an orientation lesson with 26 classes at the beginning of the year. After going over the procedures for the umpteenth time, I wished there was a fun book that could do it for me. That's how *We're Going on a Book Hunt* was born. That book and *Library Monkeys*, which had earnest monkey siblings learning to care for books, were published by Upstart. They met the needs of my library curriculum and sold well to other librarians.

**If you don't know a school librarian:** Here are some topics my students requested that are underserved. Maybe one will be a good fit for you to write. In Texas, we have hunting seasons for geese, dove, deer, turkey and other animals. Students asked for easy books about hunting and fishing. They also asked for books about ways to earn money, how to make presents that adults would like, and how to train a lizard.

I have retired from my school library, but volunteer in my local school's library to keep abreast of students, books, and curriculum. Take the time to befriend your local school librarian and barter your help for insider information. It just might help you sell your next book.

# DEFEATS AND FAILURES: HOW THEY CAN HELP YOUR STORY

by Jane McBride

**W**e often talk about the importance of characters having goals and striving to reach those goals. Less often do we discuss the failures and defeats the character may encounter along the way to reaching his goal. Not only do we miss a great opportunity to up the conflict in our stories by giving the character failures and defeats, we do our readers a disservice by allowing them to believe that life is made up of only “wins.”

The fact is the many parts of life are composed with losses as well as successes. Writing is a prime example. For every book acceptance I receive, there are probably five (or even more) rejections behind it. Those who follow a favorite sports team recognize that losses are as common, if not more so, as wins. But showing how a protagonist overcomes these losses not only makes the story more interesting, it embodies the book's take-away message for the reader. And this is as true for picture books as it is for young adult novels.

**STEP 1:** Recognize that giving a protagonist defeats and failures provides opportunities for growth. But growth only happens if the defeats mean something to the protagonist.

**ACTION:** Tie the failures to the character's goals. What if your character fails to get a role in the school drama? What if she only tried out to please her parents and didn't care if she was in the play at all? Not getting a part in the play is a defeat, but it's not important to the character's true goal of winning the science fair competition. What kind of failure might she experience in that goal? What if her experiment blows up at home and she doesn't have enough money to buy more materials to repeat the experiment at the fair? That defeat is tied deeply to her goal. The character must now find another way to do the experiment and compete in the fair. This causes her to stretch and to grow.

**STEP 2:** Escalate the severity and nature of the failures/defeats as the story progresses.

**ACTION:** Increase the depth of each succeeding failure by making it take the protagonist further away from reaching his ultimate goal. If your sixteen-year-old protagonist has a goal of buying a car, what could take him further and further away from obtaining it? What if he finds a job waiting tables in a restaurant and discovers that the owner is practicing unsafe habits in keeping the food free from contamination? Our young hero does the right thing and speaks to the owner. The owner fires him immediately and tells the boy that he (the owner) will blackball him from getting a job in any other restaurant in the town.

**STEP 3:** Show growth in the character by having his goal evolve into something more noble.

**ACTION:** Make your character re-evaluate his goal throughout the story. Goals are constantly evolving because people evolve. A stagnant goal equals a stagnant story line. The protagonist in our above story goes to the Board of Health, where his claims are dismissed as “sour grapes” on his part because the owner fired him. (It turns out that the owner is good friends with one of the members of the Board of Health and already knows what's happened.) With each setback, our hero becomes more determined to do the right thing, to protect customers from getting sick — or worse — because of the unsafe practices on the restaurant owner's part. The hero's goal of saving enough money to buy a car takes a backseat in importance and gives way to a new and more important goal of correcting this wrong.

**STEP 4:** Let defeats and failures shape the character into a stronger, more caring version of himself.

*Mini Blueprint continued*

**ACTION:** Ask yourself in what areas your character needs to improve. In the story of the boy who starts off wanting to earn sufficient money to buy a car for himself, he learns through his defeats that he wants more out of life than simply gaining material goods. He wants to make a difference. His goal has turned from a somewhat selfish one to an unselfish one as he struggles to make right what he found at the restaurant. What could his new goal be? Yes, he wants to bring the unethical restaurant owner to justice, but he wants something more: he wants to make others aware of the unsafe practices not just in the food industry but in other businesses as well. He decides to join the school newspaper and write a weekly column of what's going on in his community. He has become a champion of truth. His final goal brings him to the realization that he can make a difference in the lives of others, even though he is only sixteen.

**STEP 5:** Keep the character real.

**ACTION:** Don't make your protagonist into a bright-eyed Pollyanna character who can see only the good in life. Give her imperfections and weaknesses and the occasional selfish moment. Let her defeats get her down, as they do all of us. Show the moments when she feels she can no longer go on. Show her in a bitter moment, then show her pushing that away and starting over. The important thing is not that she suffers failures but that she gets back up and keeps going.

In the story of our sixteen-year-old protagonist, let him evolve into a better version of himself, but don't make him a card-carrying do-gooder. Such characters are boring, as perfection often is. Your goal is to show HIS goals evolving as he does when he suffers a setback. Your goal is not to make him perfect. You may think that I have just contradicted myself, in first saying that his defeats and failures show help make him into a stronger being and then telling you that you should not make him perfect. Nothing could be further from my intent. Allow your character to grow despite his weaknesses. Let him experience failure and show how that shapes and refines him for the next time he suffers a defeat. Let him seek a new definition of what success is.


**STEP 6:** If you hit a snag in your plotting, interrogate your character.

**ACTION:** Be merciless in grilling him. Ask him what

his greatest fear is. Ask him what he sees as his greatest strength. Ask him how past defeats have shaped him and how he will handle future ones. Ask him if he's ever wanted to give up in reaching a particular goal. Ask him how he felt if he did give up. Then ask him what changed his mind to try again. Press him for answers. Characters can be stubborn in giving up their secrets. Write down a list of his feelings. (Yes, I am treating characters as real people. Over the course of your story, they are very real. If you want to get inside their minds and hearts, you need to treat them as such.)

## WRAPPING UP

Giving characters defeats to deal with, and failures to overcome, makes them that much more real for readers. Readers want to relate to story characters. If the character comes with a perfect life, a perfect family, and reaches all her goals without encountering problems, she isn't relatable. She won't hold a reader's interest or work her way into readers' heart. That is your goal as an author: to help your readers see themselves through the lens of the characters you create.



Each month, we will be incorporating Mini Blueprints into CBI, which are based on the step-by-step way of learning in our full Writing Blueprints. If you're not familiar with our longer Writing Blueprints that take you through the process of writing, marketing, or self-publishing your book, go to [www.writingblueprints.com](http://www.writingblueprints.com)

# Why Writers Need Routines

by Robin Phillips

A few months ago, I was bored with my writing routine and wished for a change. Life obliged me. Two kids moved home for the summer. Planned and unplanned trips disrupted my days and took more time and energy than I expected. An illness sidetracked me for two months, and my cat got sick. I couldn't count on any day looking the same and writing disappeared. Now I was overwhelmed. I thought wistfully of the old routine and wondered why I couldn't write without it.

By definition, a routine is a customary or regular course of procedure. There is no excitement in that. In fact, the words 'typical,' 'unimaginative,' and 'commonplace' also show up in the dictionary. So, why, when my writing routine disappeared, did I long for the days when I knew what to expect? Bingo.

Routines provide a structure that ensures writing happens. Following a routine means you do not have to make as many decisions about mundane and repeated actions. Should you write in your squashy chair or at your desk? Will you want a cup of tea now or later? Which project ought you to work on first? All these questions clutter up your thoughts with less important topics than your work. Clutter also comes in the form of distractions, duties, tangents, and unexpected events. Using a routine helps you ignore anything you need to in order to work.

In *The Creative Habit*, Twyla Tharp, an iconic dance choreographer, recommends doing specific things that cause your mind to click into work mode. She calls them trigger routines and I created my own for different writing jobs. For example, if I am ready to write a recipe for a particular magazine, I take several back issues, open them to the recipes, and lay out on the floor beside my computer. Doing so reminds me of what I am aiming for. For the first few days of a new nonfiction project, I read several books in the genre at the beginning of each writing period. As I move to revision, I review a list of short statements each writing time to keep me focused. The list answers these questions: Why does this interest this age group? What is the theme? What do I want them to know by the end? What is the tone? Each trigger works in getting me quickly into each project.

Another important routine is how to measure your work on a project. These routines depend on the writing goal for that session or day. If your goal is a number of words, pile pennies (or paperclips or marbles) next to your computer. Drop one penny in a jar for every 10 words. If your goal is 500 words a day, you will need 50 pennies. I like the sound they make as they plink against the glass. I like seeing the pile diminish and the jar filling up. This method keeps me writing instead of focusing on finding the 'perfect' words. At times, ten words are a stretch and dropping in a penny seems a small victory. At other times, the words flow faster and I keep going. Once I come to a natural break in my typing, I simply check how many words I added and drop in the corresponding number of pennies.

If your goal is time spent, setting a timer is the most obvious thing. Try small goals of just a few minutes. Eleven minutes is my favorite chunk of time. It is long enough to allow for a rhythm to develop, yet short enough to stay on task without letting my mind wander. If I hear the chime and I have worked during that time, this routine has done its job. Sometimes, when the revising is tough, I find that getting up every 11 minutes helps me mentally regroup and start afresh for another session. Other times, I reset the timer and keep going because I still have thoughts to get down. At the best of times, momentum carries me further. I ignore the timer and write until I have no more ideas.

Sometimes, though, time and word count goals don't work for children's writers. Perhaps you want to create a picture book dummy, revise a poem, or watch a kid try your recipe. For these types of goals, make visual cues a routine way to mark your progress. Write the activity or action on a colored sticky note. Move the notes from one side of a whiteboard to the other or place in your datebook as you complete them. They are tangible (and colorful) reminders of what you are getting done a bit at a time.

A final helpful routine is one for finishing each day's work. For too many years, I never knew when I was done writing. Isn't there always one more book to read? One

## *Why Writers Need Routines continued*

more tweak you can make to a manuscript? One more email to send? And, since many of us work at home, we cannot leave our office easily. Yet, an end-of-writing routine is vital for it moves the writing into your subconscious and allows you to focus on other things.

Two components make up the best end-of-writing routine: preparation for the next writing period and performing some physical act that denotes completion. Preparation might include choosing the next group of writing goals and which project to tackle first, and noting the times I am free to write the next day. My physical act may be emptying the pennies into a dish or placing new sticky notes on the whiteboard, but it always includes pulling down the shade and closing my office door. An end-of-writing routine tells your brain you are done for the day. Think of it like showering after a workout or doing the dishes after supper.

Routines work, but choose wisely. In her classic book, *Becoming a Writer*, Dorothea Brande recommends noting what constitutes a good hour of work for yourself and what surrounds it. Did you write before anything else or cross off a few necessary household jobs? Do you work better in the same spot each day or at a variety of spots depending on the task? Evaluate noise level, comfort level, time constraints, and level of preparation. In other words, know how you work best as a writer. Building effective routines from this knowledge ensures that writing happens whatever your mood or whatever distractions occur. These routines become grooves to slide into, helping you focus on what you are writing more quickly and with less mental effort.

I have read that the Tartar tribes of Asia spoke a curse against their enemies: *'May you stay in one place forever.'* For a writer, this is having no routine or a routine that does not help you get writing done. Routines tell us what to expect and are, therefore, an essential writing tool. If you are happy with your writing output, your routine is working. If you want to challenge yourself to either produce more or produce faster, choose a new routine. Don't wait for life to overwhelm you to make changes. And be careful what you wish for.