

**THE CHILDREN'S WRITER'S BIG  
BOOK OF "HOW TO"**



By Laura Backes,  
Publisher, *Children's Book Insider*

CHILDREN'S BOOK INSIDER, LLC  
901 COLUMBIA ROAD  
FORT COLLINS, CO 80525-1938  
970/495-0056 [MAIL@WRITE4KIDS.COM](mailto:MAIL@WRITE4KIDS.COM)  
[HTTP://WRITE4KIDS.COM](http://WRITE4KIDS.COM)

# THE CHILDREN'S WRITER'S BIG BOOK OF "HOW TO"

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

THIS MATERIAL MAY NOT BE COPIED AND DISTRIBUTED WITHOUT THE EXPRESS WRITTEN PERMISSION OF THE PUBLISHER.

Copyright 2006, Children's Book Insider, LLC all rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher.

Children's Book Insider, LLC  
901 Columbia Rd  
Fort Collins, CO 80525

ISBN 1-930029-09-2

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO READERS: This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. This information is sold with the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering legal, accounting or any other professional service. If legal advice or other expert assistance is required, the service of a competent professional should be sought. Therefore, the Author and Publisher assume no responsibility to any person or persons in connection with the use of this publication, and this publication is sold with this understanding and none other.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                       |          |
|---------------------------------------|----------|
| <b>Master the Art of Writing.....</b> | <b>9</b> |
|---------------------------------------|----------|

## How To.....

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Add Atmosphere and Mood to Your Story.....</b>           | <b>10</b> |
| <b>Add Tension To Your Stories.....</b>                     | <b>12</b> |
| <b>Avoid Being Preachy.....</b>                             | <b>14</b> |
| <b>Avoid Typos.....</b>                                     | <b>16</b> |
| <b>Become a Better Writer Quickly.....</b>                  | <b>17</b> |
| <b>Brainstorm Ideas Through Freewriting.....</b>            | <b>20</b> |
| <b>Break The Storytelling Mold.....</b>                     | <b>22</b> |
| <b>Build a Story, Chapter by Chapter.....</b>               | <b>24</b> |
| <b>Choose the Correct Point of View.....</b>                | <b>26</b> |
| <b>Choose The Right Vocabulary (by Joanne Rocklin).....</b> | <b>28</b> |
| <b>Craft a Great Beginning.....</b>                         | <b>29</b> |
| <b>Create Characters for Older Readers.....</b>             | <b>32</b> |
| <b>Create Your Own Unique World.....</b>                    | <b>34</b> |
| <b>Cut Words Painlessly.....</b>                            | <b>37</b> |
| <b>Decide Whether to Illustrate Your Own Book.....</b>      | <b>39</b> |
| <b>Develop an Original Voice.....</b>                       | <b>41</b> |
| <b>Develop Great Characters.....</b>                        | <b>44</b> |
| <b>Develop Rhythm In Your Prose.....</b>                    | <b>46</b> |
| <b>Develop Strong Secondary Characters.....</b>             | <b>48</b> |
| <b>Develop the Four Traits of Successful Authors.....</b>   | <b>50</b> |
| <b>Eliminate Passive Writing.....</b>                       | <b>53</b> |
| <b>Jumpstart Your Writing By Asking "Why?".....</b>         | <b>55</b> |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Let Your Plot Flow From Your Characters.....  | 57  |
| Master Backstory .....                        | 59  |
| Master Cause and Effect.....                  | 61  |
| Master Simile and Metaphor.....               | 63  |
| Master the Five Types of Plots.....           | 65  |
| Organize Your First Draft .....               | 67  |
| Show, Don't Tell.....                         | 69  |
| Simplify Your Writing.....                    | 71  |
| Stop a Reader in His Tracks.....              | 74  |
| Take the Pain Out of Being Critiqued.....     | 76  |
| Think Like a Kid .....                        | 78  |
| Title Your Book .....                         | 80  |
| Turn a Personal Struggle Into a Book.....     | 82  |
| Turn Your Idea Into a Book.....               | 84  |
| Use Humor Effectively .....                   | 87  |
| Use Slang in Your Writing .....               | 89  |
| Use Verbs Wisely (by Josephine Nobisso) ..... | 91  |
| Write a Powerful Ending.....                  | 92  |
| Write About Controversial Subjects.....       | 95  |
| Write Great Beginnings .....                  | 98  |
| Write in First Person .....                   | 101 |
| Write in Rhyme.....                           | 104 |
| Write Seamless Dialogue .....                 | 106 |
| Write With a Light Touch.....                 | 108 |

## **Write Within Genres..... 111**

### **How To.....**

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Avoid The "Talking Animal Trap" .....   | 112 |
| Break Into the Educational Market ..... | 114 |
| Create a Board Book.....                | 116 |
| Find the Focus for Nonfiction.....      | 118 |
| Get Started Writing Graphic Novels..... | 120 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Get Started Writing Greeting Cards.....                                | 122 |
| Get Started Writing Historical Fiction .....                           | 123 |
| Get Started Writing Informational Picture Books.....                   | 126 |
| Get Started Writing Mysteries.....                                     | 128 |
| Get Started Writing Picture Books .....                                | 130 |
| Get Started Writing Plays.....   | 133 |
| Give Advice to Kids (by Mary Bowman-Kruhm and Claudine Wirths) .....   | 134 |
| Make Your Nonfiction More Exciting.....                                | 135 |
| Polish Your Picture Book .....   | 138 |
| Tell the Difference Between Easy Readers and Early Chapter Books ..... | 140 |
| Write a Chapter Book .....   | 143 |
| Write a Memorable Picture Book .....                                   | 145 |
| Write Biographies .....  | 148 |
| Write Christian Fiction for Older Readers .....                        | 151 |
| Write Christian Fiction for Younger Readers.....                       | 153 |
| Write for Reluctant Readers.....                                       | 156 |
| Write for the Bilingual Market .....                                   | 159 |
| Write Mysteries .....  | 162 |
| Write Nonfiction for Very Young Readers, Part 1 .....                  | 164 |
| Write Nonfiction for Very Young Readers, Part 2 .....                  | 167 |

## **Write for Magazines..... 169**

### **How To.....**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Analyze a Magazine for Publishing Opportunities.....           | 170 |
| Get Published in National Magazines With "Filler" Pieces ..... | 174 |
| Get Started Writing for Magazines.....                         | 176 |
| Get Started Writing for Religious Magazines .....              | 179 |
| Write a Magazine Article Step By Step.....                     | 181 |
| Write an Article Query .....                                   | 183 |
| Write Nonfiction Magazine Articles.....                        | 185 |
| Write Self-Help Articles for Kids .....                        | 187 |

# Submit Your Manuscript & Get It Published..... 189

## How To.....

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Analyze a Publisher's Catalog.....                            | 190 |
| Avoid Looking Like a Beginner.....                            | 192 |
| Avoid Rejection Letters.....                                  | 195 |
| Break the Rules of Submitting a Manuscript.....               | 197 |
| Check Out a Publisher Before Signing a Contract.....          | 199 |
| Determine If Your Idea Is Any Good.....                       | 201 |
| Develop a Successful Series.....                              | 204 |
| Enter Writing Contests.....                                   | 207 |
| Find the Right Publisher For Your Manuscript.....             | 209 |
| Impress an Editor.....  | 211 |
| Improve Your Chances of Getting Published.....                | 214 |
| Know If Your Agent is Right For You.....                      | 216 |
| Know If Your Story Is Ready to Submit.....                    | 219 |
| Pitch a Series Idea to a Publisher.....                       | 221 |
| Plan a School Presentation.....                               | 222 |
| Protect Yourself When Dealing with Publishers and Agents..... | 226 |
| Select the Correct Submission Format for Your Manuscript..... | 228 |
| Stand Out From the Slushpile.....                             | 230 |
| Target the Right Publisher (by Liza Burby).....               | 233 |
| Tell an Editor What The Illustrations Should Look Like.....   | 236 |
| Tell if a New or Small Press is Legitimate.....               | 237 |
| Understand an Editor.....                                     | 239 |
| Understand Rights.....  | 242 |
| Understand Royalties Versus Flat Fees.....                    | 244 |
| Understand the Genres of Children's Literature.....           | 247 |
| Understand What an Agent Does.....                            | 250 |
| Write a Nonfiction Query Letter.....                          | 252 |

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>Write a Winning Query Letter .....</b> | <b>256</b> |
| <b>Write for a Book Packager .....</b>    | <b>258</b> |

|                               |            |
|-------------------------------|------------|
| <b>FURTHER READING .....</b>  | <b>260</b> |
| <b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR .....</b> | <b>261</b> |





# **Master the Art of Writing**

## **Add Atmosphere and Mood to Your Story**

The tone of your story can do as much to engage the reader as your plot and characters. In fact, the mood you create ties in directly with the emotional connection your reader makes with the book. It's this connection, or lack thereof, that undermines the entire reading experience. Careful attention to your choice of words, your character's perspective and the structure of your sentences can go a long way toward adding emotional impact to your book.

### **Words**

Similes and metaphors can create a quick, dramatic picture for the reader. Similes (saying how two things are similar, i.e. She was curled up on the pillow like a Siamese cat) has more of a visual element—you're showing the reader how a person or place looks. Metaphors (linking two dissimilar objects) go deeper; they show the nature of the person or thing being described (Mary was a Siamese cat, curled up on the pillow). Each has its place in your descriptions, though should be used sparingly to have the greatest impact. A book overflowing with similes and metaphors sounds like the author can't come right out and say what he means. Onomatopoeia (a word that imitates the sound it names) adds tremendous atmosphere to a scene without any extra words. The whirl of a dentist's drill in the next room, a car's purring engine or the plunk and splat of hail on a roof all engage the reader's senses in a way that brings the story alive. Specific verbs have emotional undertones (plodded instead of walked, galloped instead of ran), but nouns do too. If your character refers to a young child as a tot, it could be construed as affectionate or condescending, depending on the way the term is delivered. A crone conjures up a more frightening image than old woman. Squall, gale and breeze add a much more specific atmosphere to a scene than wind.

### **A Character's Perspective**

Ideally, one of the jobs of the author is to write in such a way so the reader gets inside the character's head and sees the world through his or her eyes. In order to create an authentic mood to the story, the author must look through the character's eyes as well.

Put yourself in your character's shoes and think about which senses would be involved for the emotion you want to convey. For example, let's look at fear. There are really two kinds of fear; the first comes from being placed in scary surroundings, the second from being in a frightening situation. If your character is walking through a deserted old house, what would she notice? Everything would seem magnified: the creaking floor, the drips from the leaky roof, the flutter of the bats who live upstairs. Drafts would feel like someone's breathing down her neck, her heart would sound like a jackhammer. Your character's senses would be heightened, and time would appear to move very slowly. Suddenly, a monster appears at the top of the stairs, and your character's perspective shifts completely. She no longer notices her surroundings; she leaps into adrenaline-induced action. Her only thought is "How do I get out of here?" She doesn't hear the creaks, she crashes through unseen spider webs. As the author you concentrate on movement and pure emotion.

### **Sentence Structure**

Fast, clipped sentences imply strong emotions such as panic, fear, anxiety and anger. A character experiencing these powerful feelings would be completely in the moment, so the writing would consist of mainly nouns and verbs. Repeating a word compounds the tension (Go, she thought. Go. Run. Get out.) Emotions that are lesser-charged, such as happiness, contentment, simple sadness or loneliness rely as much on the character's surroundings as their thoughts, and so the text contains longer sentences, adjectives and adverbs. Again, think about what the character would take in during each mood, and adjust the text to match. Dialogue also plays an important role in creating mood, not by what's said, but how. An angry, scared or anxious person would talk in short bursts, condensing his speech to the essentials of communication: "Leave me alone!" he commanded. "Go away!" Someone who's relaxed or happy would use fuller, more expressive dialogue: "Isn't it a great day?" she asked. "I just love the way the grass smells at the beginning of summer." If your character's exhausted, her speech will also sound tired, with sentence and thought fragments: "We're forgetting something...where's that list? There were three things. Something about...oh, I think it was the map. Where's the map?"

Using the above techniques, you can incorporate atmosphere, tone and mood into your story without adding extra words or scenes. You'll also add layers of meaning, making a huge impact on your readers.

## Add Tension To Your Stories

I've often written about the need for tension, or suspense, in fiction. Another word would be "conflict"--those twists and turns of plot that get the reader's heart beating. Whatever term you use, it's an essential element in every story. What's the point of reading a book in which the characters only face happy, calm, predictable situations? In a word, it's boring.

But you can't simply lay tension over an existing story. The conflict has to be an intrinsic element of the plot and characters. Plan out your tension from the beginning; incorporate suspense into the basic action of the plot. Here are some ways you can achieve tension-filled stories.

***Start with the characters.*** As you're creating your characters, give them strengths and weaknesses. Your main character's strengths will help him or her solve the problem of the story. But your character's weaknesses can provide obstacles to reaching that resolution and therefore enrich the plot. For example, if you're writing a middle grade mystery, your character might have extensive knowledge about rocks or bats which helps her find an essential clue inside a cave. But if she's deathly afraid of the dark, going into that cave will be a challenge.

Often it's the characters weaknesses, or flaws, that get him in trouble in the first place. Or, create secondary characters that work in opposition to your main character, throwing roadblocks in her way as she wrestles with the story's conflict.

***Ask "What if..."*** In *The ABCs of Writing for Children*, compiled by Elizabeth Koehler-Pentacoff (Barnes & Noble Books), author Katherine Sturtevant said, "If you're writing a novel, spend some time writing pages that you know will never be part of the book. Put your character in various situations and see how he or she behaves. How would she react if her house had burned down and all of her possessions were gone? What if her best friend won a contest she'd been hoping to win herself? If the person she resented most in the world suddenly gave her a present? Since these situations don't have to appear in your book, there's an endless list of

them. You can put your character in scenes with her parents, siblings, or friends until you feel you have a good handle on how she would behave under a variety of situations."

Once you've learned your character's reactions to stressful situations, incorporate those reactions into scenes from your plot.

***Raise the stakes.*** The most satisfying plots have the character trying to achieve a goal, failing several times, and finally succeeding. Each time the character fails, the tension mounts. Don't be afraid to raise the stakes for your character--put him in danger, pull the rug out from under her feet, make him face his worst fear. If the worst thing that could possibly happen to your character actually occurs, and your character overcomes those odds and succeeds, your readers will hang on every word.

## Avoid Being Preachy

When writing for children, it's very tempting to use fiction as a vehicle for teaching important life lessons. And while there's nothing wrong with this, the author's desire to impart wisdom earned from years of experience can easily become heavyhanded. Storytelling that degenerates into didacticism can appear in fiction for any age, but it's most glaring in picture books where the spare text makes the lesson stand out. The trick, then, for any writer, is to recognize the line between teaching and preaching.

Teaching raises the lesson or concept to the reader, and allows the reader to discover the answers for herself. This is generally done through the story's main character, who learns something because of the situations he encounters in the plot. Preaching offers no reader involvement--the author tells the reader what to think, and expects the reader to believe it simply because the author said so. Preaching is like getting unsolicited advice, which no one appreciates.

Kathleen Allan-Meyer employs very gentle teaching methods in her Little Bear picture books, published by Bob Jones University Press. Little Bear, who represents a typical 5- year-old, encounters all sorts of kidlike situations that require him to think about his actions. The author has Little Bear's mother plant the seeds for change with a parental observation ("In order to find a friend, you must be a friend." from *Little Bear's Secret*, and "Not everything in the world is fun and easy. Important things take hard work." from *Little Bear at Big School*). Mother Bear doesn't tell Little Bear how to think or act--that's up to Little Bear himself. He chooses whether to follow this advice, makes some mistakes, and finally learns in a way that's meaningful to both him and the reader. Because Little Bear ultimately decides to make the change, he keeps his self- respect and learns a lesson he can use over and over.

Many skillfully-written picture books have a lesson that's so subtle it's not literally included in the text, but rather felt by the reader. In *The Biggest, Best Snowman* by Margery Cuyler (Scholastic), Little Nell is told by her family (BIG Mama, BIG Sarah and BIG Lizzie) that she's too small to help around the house. When her friends (Reindeer, Hare and Bear Cub) ask her to show them how to build a snowman, her first response is that she can't. But with a bit of encouragement (and help), Little Nell builds the biggest, best snowman ever. Any child who's ever felt overlooked by the

big kids will come away from the book feeling inspired to reach for her dreams, and will learn that friends working together can accomplish much more than any one can working alone.

Eliminating preaching from your writing remains important in books for older readers, who will close a book the instant they suspect the author is lecturing to them. So step back and allow the reader to make life's discoveries along with your main character. Only then will your readers willingly listen to what you have to say.

## Avoid Typos

1. Check spelling. If you work on a computer with a spell-checker, this is your first step. But you still have to read over the manuscript for places you may have typed "form" instead of "from," "that" instead of "than," etc. The spell-checker won't catch these mistakes.
2. Check grammar. Again, if you work on a computer, invest in a grammar-checking program. There are many on the market; some of the better word processing programs even come with this feature. Besides checking spelling, grammar programs check things like verb tenses, punctuation and words typed twice by accident.
3. Read it backwards. This isn't practical, of course, for long manuscripts (unless you have a lot of time on your hands) but it really does work for letters and shorter pieces. When you read something backwards, you concentrate on each word, and your eye doesn't mistakenly fill in the gaps or gloss over errors.
4. Double check places where you have inserted or deleted text. Mark on a hard copy of the document where you are changing the text, and double-check this against your new version. It's very easy when editing on a computer to leave in words that should have been deleted.
5. Have at least one other person read your final document. Ask that person not to read for content, but to concentrate on the spelling and grammar. If they are not looking at your overall story, but the individual words and sentences, your proofreader is more apt to catch mistakes. Note: If you don't work on a computer but have a long manuscript, we advise that you hire a proofreader to perform all of the above steps. For shorter manuscripts and letters, you can get away with asking two other people to carefully read your work.



## Become a Better Writer Quickly

I recently opened up my email to find this message: "Can I get published as a children's book author if I'm not a good writer?" I was taken aback at first, but the more I thought about it, the more I appreciated the question. The sender knows her limitations, but dreams of getting published anyway. She's not suffering under the delusion that she's the next Dr. Seuss, and I admire that. She's going to look at her work with a critical eye, and search for ways to make it better. This is assuming that it's possible to learn to write well. I believe that it is.

Very few writers have the innate ability to create vibrant, relevant, compelling stories right out of the gate. Most have to work at it. And those who see writing as a skill that is never quite mastered, requiring a lifelong devotion to the learning process, will be most successful. Where this gets tricky is that unlike other skills—such as baking a cake—there is no foolproof way to learn how to write. So while I can't give you a one-size-fits-all method, I can give you some ideas on how you can find the path that works best for you.

**Read, read, read.** Why are editors always telling aspiring authors to read piles of children's books? Because they give you a concrete representation of what works. Be sure you read good books (check reviews or ask a librarian or teacher for recommendations). By simply reading, you'll learn about the ebb and flow of a story, how a character is introduced and developed, the types of conflicts appropriate for each age group, how to build tension in scenes and chapters, the relation of sub-plots to the main storyline, how dialogue moves the plot along, and much more. You'll experience firsthand how a skilled author uses sensory images to immerse the reader completely in the story. By comparing several authors writing for the same age group, you'll hear different literary voices. I suggest reading books like those you wish to write, as well as books one level younger and one level older. So, if your goal is to write a middle grade mystery for ages 8-12, also read mysteries for ages 7-10 and 10-14. In this way, you'll become educated about precisely what makes up a middle grade novel and how it's different from fiction for older and younger readers. You might even learn that your story isn't really for middle grades after all.

Another reason for reading a lot of quality books is that you need a yardstick against which to judge your own work. You'll learn which "rules" can't be broken and those that have more wiggle room. For example, you'll be hard pressed to find a 60-page picture book in the stores, even by a well-known author. If you picture book's that long, you'll have no choice but to rethink the story and fit it into 32 pages. However, you can experiment with unconventional characters and unexpected viewpoints. And the older the reader, the fewer rules apply. But no matter what you do with your plot, characters or writing style, make sure you know why you're doing it. Don't write the story in present tense unless it needs to unfold in real time for the reader. Don't incorporate flashbacks unless they're vital for understanding what's going on in the story now.

**Find a system that works for you.** The first step toward learning to write is figuring out how you learn the best. Some authors I know are very left-brained; they love charts and graphs and lists. They thrive on tracking their scenes and plotting out their book on every level before they start to write. Those left-brainers will analyze published books and count the words per page, note which scene contains the plot's catalyst, chart out where the tension rises and falls in each chapter. Others prefer to learn more intuitively. They read books, absorb the different writing styles, and maybe jot down a few notes with overall impressions or key points they want to remember. They have a general idea of where their own story is going, and aren't afraid to experiment and take detours along the way.

If you don't know where you fall on the spectrum, try different approaches and see what feels right. Remember that there is no one way of doing this, and every method has its pros and cons. Plotting out your story beforehand can prevent you from wandering off track, but the lists can become an evasive technique to keep you from actually writing the book. Letting the words spill onto the page with no grand plan feels very creative, but usually results in huge first drafts that have to be significantly trimmed and shaped. If you write long enough you'll discover your weaknesses and devise ways to work around them. Maybe you outline first, then put it away while you write your first draft. Maybe you lay out your scenes on a plotline after each chapter, then revise as needed before moving on to the next chapter. If your dialogue tends to wander in circles before coming to the point, you'll learn to get it on paper and then tighten it in the second draft.

**Recognize your strengths.** Some authors are brilliant nonfiction writers but can't sell a fiction story. Others write wonderful picture books but are overwhelmed by all the layers to a novel. Instead of trying to force a style that isn't you, start with what you're naturally good at. You don't have to publish fiction to be a successful author. You may dream of writing picture books, but if you have a knack for relating to teenagers, maybe young adult novels are your future.

Discovering your strengths involves experimenting with several writing styles and age groups. If you don't know where to start, think about the kinds of children's books you most like to read. Then play around with writing dialogue or scenes for the same age group. If you're naturally drawn to nonfiction, make a list of topics that excite you. Start by writing about one of the subjects in the style of some of your favorite children's magazines.

**Above all, practice.** Over the years I've worked with writers who have gotten published through sheer force of will. They've gone over manuscripts again and again, taking them from mediocre to polished. They've put aside ideas that simply didn't work and turned to something new. And they never submitted the first or second draft to an editor, because those manuscripts could always be improved. They weren't very good writers when they began, but they learned. And you can too.

## Brainstorm Ideas Through Freewriting

This article is excerpted from *Brainstorming Workshop* by Katherine Ploeger. To order a copy of *Brainstorming Workshop*, visit <http://write4kids.com/collect.html> or call 800/807-1916.

-----

Freewriting was first discussed by Peter Elbow, whose books on writing have been of help to authors for many years. This technique was designed with the idea that writing is discovery, that people learn what they think once they write down their thoughts. The forced movement of fingers on keyboard or pen on paper somehow enables the unconscious or subconscious to dredge up ideas and images that you might not have otherwise thought about. The mind wants to play the game, so it produces ideas because it gets bored with writing, "I have nothing else to say, I can't think of anything else to write," or other writings which often appear in freewriting sessions.

It is also helpful in developing writing fluency, of tricking that "Editor-on-Your-Shoulder" into thinking that nothing important is being written, hence the editor can ignore whatever appears on the screen or page. This technique also enables you to overcome anxiety and fear about writing, since it doesn't really matter what you write, as long as the pen or fingers are moving.

Freewriting is especially helpful if you just want to purge your mind (and soul) of all the ideas you have bursting in and cluttering up your brain. With freewriting, detours of thought are encouraged; just put down your thoughts, following whatever paths that might occur. You will be amazed at the insights and sudden sparks of vision you may stumble upon.

**Methods:** You can do freewriting two ways. First, you can just write down anything that comes to mind, without focusing your mind on anyone topic or subject. In this rambling, you may put down story ideas, aggravations suffered earlier in the day or week that still bug you, flights of fancy with dialogue, overheard conversations, particularly interesting behaviors observed while watching others, anything that reaches that level of consciousness that enables you to notice it and write it down.

The second way is to focus on a specific topic or problem. You decide you are going to freewrite about your character's motivation, hoping to discover something as you are freewriting. Or you can describe the setting or location in which a particular scene takes place and go from there. For nonfiction, you can freewrite about your general topic until you zero in on the specific angle you want to take for your book or article (you can also freewrite questions you want to answer in future research).

**Technique:** The technique of freewriting is quite simple. As long as your pen is moving (or your fingers are typing), you are doing the exercise right. Do not stop to correct errors or revise your words n just keep writing any and all thoughts as they occur to you. Allow your mind to take detours. When you are exhausted, go back and reread what you wrote, circling or underlining any pertinent words, phrases, sentences, images, etc.' You can then "loop" your freewriting, by taking those underlined words and phrases and using them as a starting point for another freewriting session.

Continue looping until you have exhausted your supply of ideas. Put the freewriting aside for a day or two, and then return to it to see if it triggers anything else. This is a great technique for developing story ideas, or getting through a troublesome scene.

## Break The Storytelling Mold

If your writing seems stuck in a rut, perhaps it's time to put that manuscript aside and watch some TV. Or go to the movies. Or read a comic book.

I'm not suggesting you goof off. Rather, by looking at other entertainment art forms, you might discover a fresh approach to storytelling. Here are some new avenues to explore courtesy of some other very creative folks (don't be put off by the adult content of these examples -- it's the storytelling techniques we're after):

- Don't be so literal-- Listen to the lyrics of a Bob Dylan or Elvis Costello song. You may be hard pressed to figure out what the songs are actually about, but the words themselves paint such vivid pictures that you can't help but remember the poetry. While you want to avoid such abstraction in a picture book, novels for older children can benefit from moments of poetic prose and subtlety that allow the reader to find personal meaning in the story.
- Tell a story in a different way -- Selective movie-watching can give you fresh ideas on how to present a story. The movie "Dead Man Walking" gave equal sympathy to both sides of the death penalty issue, forcing the audience to draw their own conclusions. The Japanese film "Rashomon" by Akira Kurosawa tells the same story through the eyes of several different people, each giving their own interpretation of the events. The independent movie "Slacker" by director Richard Linklater follows one character for about 10 minutes. Then someone walks by, presumably an extra in the film, and the camera zooms in on this new person as he or she becomes the focus of the movie for a short period of time. This technique is repeated throughout the film.
- In "The Godfather, Part II," director Francis Ford Coppola tells the parallel stories of organized-crime boss Vito Corleone and his son Michael in their respective eras as head of the family. The movie jumps back and forth in time, but the scenes are connected because the changes in the father as he rose to power are mirrored in his son many years later.

The storytelling techniques of these films add more texture to the plot than a linear beginning, middle and end would have.

- Go for the unexpected -- The first half of Robert Rodriguez' movie "From Dusk 'Til Dawn" is a classic criminals-on-the-run story, until the main characters are locked in a bar where all the patrons turn into vampires. While you might find the movie violent and distasteful, you have to admit there is no way you could have predicted where the story eventually ended up. Try taking your story to unexpected places, and don't always worry about explaining why.
- Be willing to take chances -- An animated film that appeared at the Breckenridge film festival involved Leonard, a latchkey kid, who receives a pet dog for his birthday. However, his parents failed to check the vital signs of the mail-order pet, and the dead dog is dubbed "Stiffy" by Leonard. Too young to grasp death, Leonard takes Stiffy out for his first walk.

Now, please don't send me letters about what a horrible idea this is for a children's story. My point is that the writer went out on a limb, and the result was very funny. Think backwards -- Characters are all around us. When you see someone interesting in an unexpected place, ask yourself, "How did this person get here?" Start at the ending, then back up and show how your character arrived at that point. Many movies use this technique, but it's rare in children's books.

Expand your storytelling repertoire. Try new things, take chances. Much of what you write will never find its way to an editor's desk, but that's as it should be. Writing must be viewed as a creative, experimental process -- if we sit down to write with the intent of sending this story in this form to an editor, we not only put undue pressure on ourselves, but place limits on our imagination. Look for storytelling in every aspect of our culture. Incorporate what you like into your writing, and rest assured that those hours in front of the television can now be considered research.

## **Build a Story, Chapter by Chapter**

One of the challenges authors face when writing anything longer than a picture book is knowing when to insert chapter breaks. Chapters serve several purposes, one of which is to divide the text into manageable chunks. The younger the reader, the shorter those chunks should be. Easy readers and young chapter books (for kids up to about age 9) have chapters under five pages long. It's important to give beginning readers frequent breaks. Middle grade novels average eight pages per chapter; young adult chapters can go up to 12 pages. These numbers are general guidelines; the story should ultimately dictate the length of the chapters. But keep in mind that while there's no such thing as a chapter that's too short, excessively lengthy chapters can give the impression that the plot is stalled instead of moving forward.

Chapters are built from several scenes that make up one plot point. Shorter books have simpler plots, therefore fewer scenes are required for each plot point. For example, in the first two chapters of a chapter book for ages 7-10, Emma's father has taken a new job that requires him to travel frequently. So Emma, who lost her mother when she was a baby, will now live with her grandparents while Dad is on the road. (Plot point 1: Emma moves in with Grandma and Grandpa. Scenes: Emma's father brings her to grandparents' house; Emma says good-bye to Dad who is leaving on a long business trip; Emma watches Dad drive away from the window of her attic bedroom. End Chapter 1). Emma's sad about leaving her school and is afraid her old friends will forget about her.

She's also afraid Dad will forget about her tenth birthday, which is less than a month away. Grandma and Grandpa think birthday parties are frivolous, and never do more than send her a card. (Plot point 2: Emma encounters the unfamiliar surroundings of her grandparents' house and learns that her grandparents haven't celebrated a birthday or anniversary for 30 years. Scenes: Emma unpacks in the dark, musty attic room; Grandma gives Emma a list of chores; Emma mentions her birthday at dinner and is told there will be no party. End Chapter 2). Middle grade and young adult novels are more complex, weaving subplots into the main storyline. So a chapter may contain a plot point for the primary story, as well as a plot point for a subplot. Or, a chapter may exist solely to develop a subplot, in which case it would also be made up of scenes that convey one subplot point.



Once you've determined when your chapters will break, you need to decide how you'll accomplish this. Easy reader chapters are best when they are self-contained units--in other words, each chapter stands alone almost like a short story. They are distinct events that don't necessarily lead immediately into the next chapter. This allows the child to read one chapter in a sitting and then pick up the book later without losing the thread of the plot. In action- packed plots for older readers, you may choose to break the chapter in the middle of a scene, thus heightening the suspense. For example, in the last scene of Chapter 4, Josh is alone in the house at night and hears a knock on the door. He tiptoes up to the window and peers out at the porch, but sees nothing. Then he hears another knock. If you resist having him answer the door until the beginning of Chapter 5, your readers won't put down the book.

More middle grade and young adult fiction is being written with two main characters who alternate telling the story. The clearest way to do this is to give each narrator his or her own chapters. Alert the reader to each chapter's viewpoint character either by writing in third person (*Hannah woke early the next morning...; Brent dashed into class just as the bell rang...*), or by titling the chapters with the viewpoint characters' names. Ground the reader in the time and place immediately. Use words like The next day, That night, or Later that week to show how much time has passed since the last chapter this character narrated. When the setting or time period changes between two scenes within a chapter, you can insert a drop down (an extra blank line) before the new scene to give a visual clue that the story's moving forward, but also use a transition to show when and where the new scene takes place (*The street lights came on just as Hannah rang Brent's doorbell.*)

Outlining your story before you begin writing can help decide where your chapters will break. Or, after your first draft is complete, go back and jot down the plot points you've covered in each chapter. Do you have two major plot events in one chapter? Try breaking that chapter into two. Does the chapter fail to advance the main plotline or a subplot? If so, that chapter doesn't serve a clear purpose in the story, and should either be cut or incorporated into another chapter. Building a book with strong chapters keeps the story moving, and guarantees the plot will be much more satisfying to the reader.

## Choose the Correct Point of View

The point of view -- how you choose to tell your story -- determines the voice of your writing. Children's stories are told from the viewpoint of your main character. Who this character is - his or her personality, temperament, strengths and weaknesses - will affect how the story is told.

Whichever viewpoint technique you choose also impacts the way you develop your main character for the reader.

**First person:** The first person viewpoint uses the "I". Your main character is telling the story in his or her own words. This point of view allows the writer to easily show the character's personality because every thought, feeling and opinion expressed in the narrative comes from that character. The author must know the main character very well before starting the story; a flat, undeveloped character will not hold the reader's interest. The limitations to this viewpoint are that the character must remain actively involved in the story at all times, otherwise he ends up standing on the sidelines and describing the action in long, telling passages. Physical descriptions of the main character come through dialogue from other characters ("I've always loved your curly hair," Sue told me) or by the main character comparing himself to another person (I have my dad's blue eyes). Rarely does a character stop and describe herself for no reason.

When working in first person, you can only show the thoughts of your main character, and you can only see the events your main character sees. The thoughts of other characters must be expressed through dialogue. First person, past tense is the most common, and effective, narration technique. Some young adult novels use first person, present tense, but avoid using this in picture books or novels for young children because it is sometimes difficult to read as it sounds like everything is happening simultaneously. (I am running down the walk. I open the gate and step into the yard.)

**Third person, subjective:** With third person you use the pronouns "he" and "she," but you are still telling the story through one character's eyes. You get close to your main character by showing only his or her thoughts and feelings and following that

character through the story, but you don't have to write the narration as if it's coming out of your main character's mouth.

This is often the easiest point of view for beginning writers to master. Be careful not to comment or editorialize upon your character's actions (Billy should have known better), or speak directly to the reader (Can you guess what happened next?). You as the author must remain invisible so your readers can immerse themselves within the world of your story.

**Omniscient:** The omniscient point of view is like looking at the story through a movie camera. You can show the reader what's happening in several places at once, but you don't get close to anyone character or see their thoughts. This can be useful at the beginning of a chapter to set the scene (as E.B. White does in *Charlotte's Web*), but after a paragraph or two switch to the viewpoint of your main character. An entire book written with the omniscient point of view does not allow the reader to identify with anyone character or know whose story you are telling.

While most children's books encompass one main character and one point of view, some young adult novels alternate points of view between two or three main characters. This is best done when entire chapters focus on one character and one viewpoint. It's difficult to do this successfully in books for younger children unless each character has a very different role in the book, and you are a talented writer (as in Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting*).

## Choose The Right Vocabulary (by Joanne Rocklin)

Always be aware that your audience is learning to read. But don't be stymied by worries about grade levels or vocabulary lists. Just use your common sense! Write in simple, short sentences: subject, verb, object. If it's a choice between using a two-syllable word and a three syllable one, use the former. If you do introduce an interesting "hard" word, make sure the reader would be able to sound it out, or figure it out from the story's context or an illustration. Once you've introduced a challenging word, repeat it elsewhere, for practice. I did all that with the word "invitation" in *The Case of the Missing Birthday Party* (Scholastic). And as E.B. White said, "Kids love words that give them a hard time, provided they are in a context that absorbs their attention."

## Craft a Great Beginning

When an editor opens up the envelope containing your manuscript and begins to read, you have 10 seconds to get her attention. If she's not captivated by the end of the first page (or maybe the second page if she's having a good day), it's not likely she'll continue.

If that sounds harsh, think about this: editors have more patience than your juvenile audience. So how do you guarantee that your readers will keep reading? The first sentence must be active, must pull the reader into the book. The first paragraph needs to set the stage by introducing elements of the main character, the setting and the upcoming conflict. By the end of the first page, your reader should be so involved in the story that there's no turning back.

Sound difficult? It is. Beginnings are so important that entire chapters have been devoted to them in writing how-to books. Crafting a compelling opening to your story takes practice, time and several revisions. But anyone can teach himself to write a better first sentence, first paragraph and first page by keeping one thing in mind: Begin at the beginning. Start your story at the beginning of the story, not the beginning of your character's life. Don't force your readers to wade through boring details of the character's past, lengthy descriptions of the character's family or home, or painful recitations of everything the character did since she got out of bed that morning. Ideally, your story opens with an event or a moment in your character's life that signals impending change. There are a few notable exceptions, which I'll talk about below, but in general you can't go wrong when you begin a book with action.

The younger audiences of picture books (up to age 8), easy readers (ages 5-9 reading on their own) and chapter books (ages 7-10) can't easily digest a lot of information in a short space, so you have to choose what story aspects you present in the first few paragraphs. Think about what's important to young readers of fiction—they want to know what the story's going to be about. So open your book by presenting the main character and the looming problem or conflict.

*Emma's Magic Winter* by Jean Little (Harper I Can Read) starts like this:

*Emma liked reading to herself. But she did not like reading out loud.*

By the third page of this easy reader (six sentences) we learn that Emma is shy and when she's called upon to read out loud in class, she can only whisper. This is a conflict young readers can certainly empathize with, and they'll want to know how Emma handles her problem.

In *Little Wolf's Book of Badness* by Ian Whybrow (chapter book, Carolrhoda), we also learn the story problem in the first paragraph:

*Dear Mom and Dad,*

*Please please PLEEEEEZ let me come home. I have been walking and walking all day, and guess how far? Not even 10 miles, I bet. I have not even reached Lonesome Lake yet. You know I hate going on adventures. So why do I have to go hundreds of miles to Uncle Bagbad's school in the middle of a dark, damp forest?*

The reader knows immediately that this is no ordinary wolf. He prefers home to damp forests, but his parents feel otherwise. We also immediately get to hear the character's voice. Middle grade readers who are drawn to fast-paced, action-packed stories also appreciate knowing the conflict early on.

Here's the first sentence of *The Boy Who Only Hit Homers* by Matt Christopher (Little Brown):

*The Hooper Redbirds were having their third practice session of the spring season and Sylvester Coddmyer III, a right- hander, was batting.*

No conflict yet, but we're given the setting, the main character, and the current action. Now look at the next three sentences:

*Rick Wilson hurled in the first pitch. It looked good and Sylvester swung. Swish! He missed it by six inches.*

To any reader who's ever played Little League baseball, this signals conflict.

Sometimes setting and time period are important elements of the story, and the author needs to set the stage for the reader before the action can begin. This can work with upper middle grade and young adult novels, but don't use it as an excuse to throw in a lot of description and unnecessary character details. In Richard Peck's *A Long Way from Chicago* (Dial), the small Midwestern town of the 1930's in which the book is set becomes almost a character in itself. In order to show the contrast between this town, which the narrator visits one week a year, and Chicago, where he lives the rest of the time, the book opens with the narrator describing Chicago's "bad old days" of Al Capone and Bugs Moran. However, Peck wanted to guarantee that the reader would stick around for the action to begin, so he created a grabber of a first sentence:

*You wouldn't think we'd have to leave Chicago to see a dead body.*

That's using your 10 seconds for all it's worth.

## Create Characters for Older Readers

When you search for a novel to read, do you hope to find a story about someone exactly like yourself? That first glimmer of recognition might be intriguing, but after several pages you'd probably get bored. Adults read for entertainment, escape, and to get glimpses of lives different from their own. If the main character is too ordinary or familiar, the story won't hold any surprises. You already know how it ends. Middle grade and young adult readers are no different. They want to identify strongly with the characters in their books, and understand those characters' problems. But they also need the characters to be a bit bigger, braver, or smarter than themselves. The problems must be more dramatic than the readers' own, the stakes higher. Tension builds when protagonists act more impulsively, foolhardy or selfishly than the reader would ever do. Novels for older readers portray a magnified version of real life.

Even though the characters and their situations might be drawn more sharply in fiction than in reality, they still have to be believable. The reader must be certain that these people could actually exist. The protagonist, however troubled, must be sympathetic enough for the reader to care about his or her problems. Including underlying universal themes of adolescence connects the reader on an emotional level. Consider *Lucy the Giant*, a young adult novel by Sherri L. Smith. At over six feet tall, Lucy is literally bigger than her peers. Her size is in sharp contrast to the small Alaskan town where she lives. Lucy's greatest desire is to fit in, a yearning familiar to most readers. One day, tired of dragging her alcoholic father home from the bars at night and enduring the taunts of her classmates and pitying glances from adults in town, Lucy runs away to Kodiak Island. Mistaken for an adult, she gets a job on a crabbing boat, where Lucy finds adventure, a family of sorts, and even has a near-death experience that teaches her running away from problems is never the answer.

It's unusual for an adventure story to feature a female protagonist, but virtually every teen will recognize part of him or herself in Lucy. Lucy's mother abandoned her at age seven, and Lucy spends much of the book blaming her parents for her problems. This is understandable, but what makes Lucy more resilient than an average teen is that she decides to take responsibility for her own life. At age 15, Lucy-- already incredibly brave, physically strong, and carrying heavy emotional baggage--grows up.



It's this "growing up" that marks a young adult character. They enter the story from the world of adolescence, and emerge with tools they'll carry into adulthood. Though the reader might not make that journey as quickly or completely, he or she needs examples of teens who did. If 13-year-old Brian Robeson from *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen can survive by himself for 54 days on a remote island in the Canadian wilderness, then surely the reader can hope to survive junior high.

Middle grade readers also love characters who face situations that are more dramatic than their own. These characters learn lessons about life or how the world works, but in the end are still content to remain adolescents for a few more years. In middle grade books, the characters who often unwittingly provide the drama simply by being themselves. Polly Horvath is a master at creating quirky, complex, funny characters who spin the plot in a new direction simply by entering a scene. Horvath pays special attention to the adults who inhabit the worlds of her child characters (*The Trolls* and *Everything on a Waffle* are my two favorites). Richard Peck does the same thing in his award-winning historical novels *A Long Way from Chicago* and *A Year Down Yonder*. Both authors have created child viewpoint characters who are dealing with everything from surviving a summer visit with Grandma to waiting for Mom and Dad to show up after their boats were lost at sea. But the stories get their sparks from larger-than-life adult characters. The humor, and the deeper meanings of these books, comes from the children gaining deeper understanding of the eccentric adults in their lives.

When you're developing characters for your middle grade or young adult novel, start with qualities readers will see in themselves. Then raise the stakes and see how your character reacts. Make her six feet tall. Strand a boy with no wilderness experience on an island with nothing but a hatchet. Send some city kids to spend two weeks in a small town with a crotchety grandmother. Shake up an ordinary family by dropping in an aunt from another country who spins tall tales that just might be true. Go just beyond your own experience, and that of your readers, and think big.

## Create Your Own Unique World

Have you seen the movie *Being John Malkovich*? It's the story of a forlorn puppeteer played by John Cusack, who works as a file clerk on floor seven and a half of a Manhattan office building. When he steps off the elevator he has to bend over, because the ceiling is only about five feet high. None of the characters seem to notice--this is their everyday world, and they go about their jobs no differently than if they could stand upright. But to the audience, the visual device of a building with half a storey signals there is something slightly off-kilter about this particular universe. And once we enter, it's perfectly logical that the puppeteer will eventually find a metaphysical portal into the brain of actor John Malkovich.

Writers of fantasy and science fiction have long known that the success of their stories largely depends on how much imagination and detail they invest in their settings. Readers willingly suspend their disbelief and enter a world of magic, time travel and talking animals because that world clearly exists independently of our own. But why can't more everyday, earthly stories do the same thing? A tweak of the environment can spin an ordinary plot in an unexpected direction. The trick is to create a place that's just a bit off-center, so the reader knows it's the real world, only a tad exaggerated. It's like viewing your story through a funhouse mirror--some elements being wider and rounder than in real life, others elongated and skinny. And because the characters know only this universe, none ever question its shape.

When the architect built Wayside School, the setting of Louis Sachar's middle grade collection *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*, he made a mistake: instead of the classrooms sitting side by side, the building is 30 storeys high with one room on each floor (he said he was sorry). Do you think in such a school that children might be turned into apples and sleeping in class would be considered educational? Of course!

Skewing the environment of your story doesn't have to turn it in a wacky direction. You can go sinister instead. The entire town of Waymer, the setting of Jerry Spinelli's middle grade novel *Wringer*, turns out for the annual weeklong Family Fest, culminating with the pigeon shoot fund-raiser. Sound too Norman Rockwellian for your taste? We're not talking clay pigeons here. The townsfolk shoot live birds, and the clincher is that all the 10-year-old boys are drafted as "wringers" to break the

necks of the wounded pigeons. Palmer is about to turn 10, and though all his friends are eagerly anticipating this year's shoot, Palmer's dreading it. Once the reader gets over the shock that the people of Waymer actually condone this ritual, we can't wait to see how Palmer handles his fate. Spinelli gives a dark undertone to what could have been a predictable, preachy story about peer pressure, and throws plenty of humorous surprises into the mix.

The best authors absolutely inhabit the world they've created. So do their characters. Though they may look like us and have problems similar to ours, these people aren't exactly real. Think of the crime noir films such as *L.A. Confidential*, *The Grifters* or *Double Indemnity*. The hard-boiled, cynical characters speak with a cryptic toughness that would be laughable in any other setting, but absolutely fits their shady, often sleazy environment. The Peanuts comic strips made kids and their pets the center of the universe, with adults regulated to speaking incomprehensibly from outside the frame. The characters took on the qualities of the absent adults--Charlie Brown worried, Lucy was his sadistic therapist, Snoopy wrote bad novels. All of these characters need their environment to survive. That's why sitcom spinoffs rarely work--take Kramer out of the *Seinfeld* world, and he evaporates.

So your job this month is to watch movies, cartoons and television. Read comic strips. Find examples where the writers started out with the everyday, and then added a twist to make the ordinary world extraordinary. How does this new world affect the characters who inhabit it? Think about how Louis Sachar used this technique in his novel *Holes*, Laura Joffe Numeroff in her picture book *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*, or Dr. Seuss in *The Cat in the Hat*. Look at the illustrations for William Steig's *Pete's a Pizza* and *Spinky Sulks*. The pictures appear to simultaneously be modern and nostalgic, speaking to both kids and their parents.

Then take your ordinary setting and add a detail or two that tips it a few degrees from the norm. Finally (this is the hardest part), don't explain the change to the reader. The place, the tone, the reality you've established simply is. Allow your characters to evolve from this world, and see what happens.

Every innovative writing technique needs a name, so I'm calling this the Waffle. Polly Horvath, the master of believably eccentric tales, set her Newbery Honor novel *Everything on a Waffle* in the Canadian town of Coal Harbor (a real place), in a restaurant called The Girl on the Red Swing where everything-- lasagne, fish, even

waffles--is served on a waffle (she made that part up). This one detail establishes the folksy, quirky tone of the book. Eleven- year-old Primrose Sharp, whose parents were lost at sea, fits right in to the restaurant, even after her guinea pig catches on fire from standing too close to the oven.

So don't be afraid to serve up a Waffle now and then. Try topping it with meatloaf. You never know--you might develop a taste for it.

## Cut Words Painlessly

There comes a time in the writing of virtually every manuscript when the author must face the fact that the work is too long, and needs to be cut. Trimming words that you labored over to create is a difficult task at best, but getting rid of the extra baggage makes every book better. Here are some tips to make cutting as painless as possible:

**Put some distance between yourself and your work.** It's natural to be emotionally invested in your story, but this attachment can hamper the editing process. Do whatever is necessary to gain an objective perspective of your work: set it aside for a week, move on to another project, or pretend the manuscript was written by someone else. It's much easier to judge the merits of your writing if you can give up ownership of each word.

**Think about what your readers need to know, not what you want to tell them.** When you're revising your work, put yourself in the place of the reader. Ask yourself what your reader needs to know about each character, event, or the setting to understand what's happening in the story. Remember that stories take place over a specific period of a character's life; if you've included information beyond the scope of this story, it should be cut. The same applies to nonfiction-- determine the purpose of your book or article, and stick to the details that illuminate this purpose for the reader.

When I was writing *Best Books for Kids Who (Think They) Hate to Read*, I had a target page length in mind for the finished book. But because of the unusual layout, the number of manuscript pages didn't easily translate to the number of book pages. It wasn't until the book had been designed and we saw the page proofs that my editor and I realized the text was running about 75 pages too long. Not all were full pages (many contained only a paragraph or two), but the idea of cutting so much text was daunting nonetheless. However, once I redefined the purpose of my book (to give busy parents surefire titles for their reluctant readers at a glance), I was able to pinpoint places where I'd gone off target. For example, I love to analyze the merits of a book's themes or examine an author's writing style, but that wasn't the point of my book. When I was finally able to put myself in the shoes of my readers, I could make those extra 75 pages disappear within a week.

**Look closely at descriptions.** It's fun to play around with descriptive passages and fancy words, but too much of this can stop a story cold. In picture books, descriptions should be worked into the plot so they contribute to the forward movement of the story. Instead of describing a large family living in a small house, your character can trip over her four sisters sharing her bedroom as she gets dressed in the morning. In any kind of writing, strive to find one excellent word to say exactly what you mean rather than two or three good ones. Tightly-written, well-chosen text is always more powerful than rambling prose.

**Banish excess characters and subplots.** Well-developed characters have full lives, populated with friends, classmates, neighbors and family. But not all these people will have a place in your book. Your readers don't need to know that Mrs. Wilson lives next door unless she plays a role in the plot. With longer fiction, it's often tempting to write several sub-plots into the story simply because you have the room. But if these sub-plots aren't connected to the main storyline, or don't shed light on another aspect of your character's life that ties in with the primary story problem, they should be eliminated. The same holds true for individual scenes--even if they're beautifully written, full of humor and pithy dialogue, if they don't advance the plot, they must go.

Cutting the fat from your manuscript can be intimidating at first, but if you see it as a way of improving your work, it's ultimately liberating. Stripping away the excess allows you to see what your book is really about, and makes further revisions to plot, characters or content that much easier. But more importantly, removing layers of padding caused by extra words or scenes allows your readers to glean the meaning of your book and make it their own. Telling a story in fewer words is harder, but very much worth the effort.

## Decide Whether to Illustrate Your Own Book

Let's say you've written a picture book and you'd like to try your hand at the illustrations. You've dabbled in art for years--everyone says you're good. You know exactly how the pictures should look for your story. Why not just submit some illustrations with the manuscript?

You may have already heard that this isn't necessarily a good idea. Why? Editors list several reasons: the illustrations need to add another dimension to the story that goes beyond the words, and inexperienced artists may not have the complex vision to pull this off; the style of illustrations must complement the tone and subject of the story; the quality of art in children's books today is very high. I've known these reasons, and agreed with them, for years. But it wasn't until recently that I understood just how hard illustrating a picture book can be. Last month Linda Arms White and I taught one of our Children's Authors' Bootcamp workshops in Albuquerque. We were fortunate to have as a guest speaker Linnea Hendrickson, a librarian and children's literature instructor at the University of New Mexico. Linnea had been a member of the Caldecott Medal selection committee in 1998, the year Paul O. Zelinsky's *Rapunzel* won the highest honor publishing awards for children's book illustration. Linnea's slide show on the history of the Caldecott revealed that illustrating a picture book demands so much more than being able to draw a nice picture.

What comprises award-winning illustrations? First, the look of the pictures must perfectly match the text. To judge for yourself, get a list of the Caldecott winners from your library and study the books from the last 20 or 30 years. The first thing you'll notice is the diversity of styles and range of mediums used. Oil paintings, scratch boards, watercolors, pen and ink, cut paper collage and wood block prints were only a few of the techniques employed in the artwork. But each artist's style also provided a masterful counterpart to the story, so the words and pictures worked together to form a seamless, unified vision. If you are first and foremost an author, you need to ask yourself if your illustration style enhances your particular story, or takes away from it. What struck me most about Linnea's presentation was the sheer technical expertise of the winning illustrators. Elements of layout and design were subtly incorporated into the pictures to affect the reader on a subconscious, emotional level.

Speaking of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, one of her "touchstone" books, Linnea pointed out how the boy Max is running from the right side of the picture toward the left in the second illustration. This is in the opposite direction of how our eye is used to seeing the action unfold, and sets up a sense of unease for the reader. As Max's imaginary journey begins, the pictures get bigger, eventually spilling over the "gutter" in the middle of the book and finally encompassing three two-page spreads in the center of the story. When Max starts his trip back home, the pictures gradually get smaller again, until the final page is just text. The Wild Things themselves are a juxtaposition of conflicting emotions. Their rounded bodies and faces with huge grins mean Max isn't afraid of them, yet they also possess sharp teeth and claws. They're a part of Max, but something he needs to tame before he can return home.

Linnea commented that, when she was looking at the artwork through her camera to take the slides for her presentation, many of the pictures seemed to glow. And though some of the winning books didn't appeal to me personally, I could see what she meant. Somehow the colors and composition of the pictures leapt off the page and pulled the reader right into the book. It occurred to me that children could get an education in art appreciation just from looking at fine picture books.

Many authors do have the talent and training to be able to create exceptional artwork for their own texts. But if you have any doubts, my advice is to leave the illustrations to someone else. The illustrator bears a tremendous amount of responsibility toward the success of a picture book. Yes, the words provide the story, without which the pictures wouldn't exist. But the first thing someone sees when they pick up a book is the pictures. The art draws the reader into the story, the cover prompts a potential buyer to open the book. When the illustrations don't live up to the text, the entire book falls flat. But when the art shines, it's magic.



## Develop an Original Voice

A story without a strong voice does not come alive for the reader, does not touch the reader's imagination. That's because the author isn't present in the story. This is tricky, because one of our goals as children's authors is to remain invisible. We want our readers to become so immersed in our stories that they forget an adult is behind the words. We don't want them to ever break that suspension of disbelief and realize that a person other than the main character created this tale. And yet if we remove ourselves entirely from the book it has no soul. So your author's "voice" is really that part of you that's timeless, that reaches back across the generations and connects with the reader on his or her level. That part of you that says "I know what you're feeling," and says it in a way that only you can.

Voice is the simplest writing technique to learn, because it's already in you. But it's the hardest to achieve, because it involves trusting yourself. It means learning what goes into a children's book and then forgetting it, or rather placing all those "rules" into your subconscious and allowing yourself to write. And learning to write without that annoying internal editor who says, "You're doing this wrong."

All stories start with an idea. We read something in the newspaper, we have a dream, we recall a vivid childhood experience. And in that moment, that first exciting spark where anything is possible, we think, "This would make a great book."

Then we start plotting out the story in our heads. And we begin to worry about the characters and the dialogue, when the climax of the plot will take place, how it will end. I suggest that in that first moment of inspiration you stop and ask yourself "Why do I need to write this story?" Forget about your audience. Be selfish. What's in it for you? You might try brainstorming on paper, freewriting where you jot down anything and everything that comes to mind. Leave that pesky editor in another room. You need to find a reason for creating this story that speaks to your writer's heart, in order to speak to your reader's heart.

Another way of looking at this is to ask yourself, "When I was five, did I need this book?" Try to answer this question from your five-year-old consciousness, which still lives inside you, rather than from your current adult perspective. If the answer is no

(you wouldn't have sat still for this story) then you're writing it for the wrong reasons. Discovering why you need to write this story -- and this applies equally to fiction and nonfiction -- leads you to that passion editors talk about. If you're writing the story or article because something inside of you needs to hear it told, then you're writing from your heart.

However, you still need to develop a technique that translates this passion from your imagination to words on paper. And a big part of the key to developing this technique is time. With a lot of practice, your voice will emerge, if you let it. This involves spending many hours just writing, without the pressure of creating a manuscript that you intend to submit to a publisher. Don't feel every time you put pen to paper it has to result in something that you're actually going to show to anyone else. Instead of dictating where your writing will go, allow yourself to be surprised. Write about whatever's on your mind at that moment, describe what you see through your window, follow a memory and see where it goes. This process of stretching your writing muscles with no pressure to actually create something substantial allows you to relax, and eventually your voice will emerge.

I suggest you keep these "creative stretches" and, after you've accumulated a file, take them out and look at them all together. Seen as a group, certain things should pop out at you. If you've really allowed yourself to write freely during these exercises without editing yourself, you'll begin to see how your writing illustrates the way you look at the world. This viewpoint, your author's viewpoint, will be original. And while I believe that there are no original themes, there are an infinite number of original stories, or ways of examining those themes.

If you read award-winning children's books you'll notice that the prose seems effortless. This is the result of a strong voice, though it's deceiving because it takes many revisions to achieve. However, if your writing sounds forced, your voice won't ring true. This forced tone happens when authors try too hard to sound like a writer. I think the best voices happen when authors write as they speak. We've all had the experience of a story sounding great in our heads, but then losing something when it's translated to paper. That's because in your head you're telling the story to yourself in your speaking voice, and when you write it down suddenly you're trying to sound like a writer. You search through the thesaurus for the perfect word, a word you'd never use in normal conversation. And suddenly in that process of writing down what's in your head, you've lost your voice. And you've adapted the voice of someone else, or

the voice you think your writing should have. So next time you write, try writing exactly what's in your head.

If you type, try typing your writing exercise with your eyes closed, so you can't see , and edit, what you've written. Closing your eyes also helps you focus inward where the story is being created. Then all you'll have to go by is how the words sound and feel in your head, and that's the closest thing to your true voice.

## Develop Great Characters

All good fiction starts with characters. Characters are the central focus of your story; they control the plot, causing its twists and turns and ultimate resolution. A mistake many writers make is conceiving the plot first and then plugging one-dimensional characters into this story line, simply moving them from point A to point B.

This results in a flat story void of any emotion. Even the most thrilling adventure won't appeal to readers if they don't care about the people involved.

Though the idea for a story (it's theme or message) or the events that comprise the plot may be the first things that spring to mind, take time to develop your characters before you start writing. Many authors write out a detailed character sketch or biography, listing both physical (include gestures, facial expressions, etc. as well as physical appearance) and personality traits.

Dig deep: What is this character's greatest fear? His worst nightmare? His proudest achievement? This kind of background is important for any type of character, including talking animals. Avoid stereotypes or ready-made characters (those your reader has seen before).

Once your character is firmly established in your mind, have him or her encounter a conflict of some kind. The way this conflict is resolved depends on who your character is, which is why the background work is so important. The resolution, which must be brought about by your main character, depends on this character's unique set of strengths and weaknesses.

The above paragraph illustrates the basic plot outline of your book. Underlying all this is the story's theme, or message.

You never state the theme to your reader, but it should be evident by what your main character has learned, or how he or she has changed, during the course of the book. Since there are only a handful of themes out there, what will make your story stand out is how your particular character has handled his or her personal conflict. If your characters are original, your plot will be original as well.

This kind of character development is also important for secondary characters. Though you won't be showing as many aspects of their personalities as with your main character, you'll find yourself implying many of the traits that make them unique. In this way, each of your characters is an individual, and the secondary characters won't all blend together in the background.

With short stories, picture books and easy readers, the plot tends to focus on one or two aspects of the main character's personality (fear of the dark, jealousy of an older sibling). Chapter books, middle grade and young adult novels have more complicated plots, and explore greater dimensions of character.

Often sub-plots bring out smaller conflicts the main character is facing that relate to the larger plot. In novels the characters tend to be about the same age as the reader or a year or two older. Picture books can feature characters of any age, as long as the conflict is something a child 4-8 years old would care about, and character has a childlike view of the world.

Remember that your characters, whether they be a child or an animal, must act consistently with the personality you have given them. They must deal with the conflict in a way that is true to themselves, and can't use knowledge or experiences they wouldn't have simply because it's convenient to the plot. In this way, your characters drive the plot and the story's outcome. Once your characters take on a life of their own, you may find your story heading in a direction you never anticipated. Let it go. If your characters are real and believable, they may take you places you never dreamed possible.

## Develop Rhythm In Your Prose

Good writing speaks to the reader in an almost audible way. We can hear the words in our heads; they have a cadence, an inflection, a rhythm. The particular pattern of words on paper adds meaning and emotion to the sentences. This is why strong, unique writing is said to have a voice.

It's obvious that poetry has either a systematic meter or a looser rhythm, but prose can have a rhythmic structure as well. With board books and picture books--those stories meant to be read out loud--rhythm adds to both the reading and listening experience. This rhythm can be developed several ways. One is by allowing the text to assume a conversational tone. In natural speech, we don't talk in complete, grammatically correct sentences. In *My Big Dog*, a picture book by Janet Stevens and Susan Stevens Crummel, an informal first-person narration establishes the pattern of Merl's speech and shows that he thinks he's a very special cat:

*Inside my house, my PUR-R-R-R-fect  
house, everything is MINE!  
My dish  
My sofa  
My chair  
My mouse  
My bed  
The people in my house are cat  
people. They love to pet me. Which I let  
them do. Sometimes, when I feel like it.*

Interspersing short sentences, or lists, between longer sentences slows down the reading and gives the child time to look at the pictures before turning the page. Another rhythmic device is repeating the same word several times, giving the sentence a strong beat. In *The Biggest, Best Snowman* by Margery Cuyler, illustrated by Will Hillenbrand, Little Nell "patted and matted and batted" snow into a ball, then:

*She rolled it and rolled it and rolled  
it to Reindeer. Reindeer nudged it and*

*nudged it and nudged it to Hare.  
Hare kicked it and kicked it and  
kicked it to Bear Cub.*

Bear Cub rolled it and rolled it and  
*rolled it until it stopped--THUD--by the  
edge of a BIG icy pond.*

The gold standard of picture book rhythm, cadence, and repetition is Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. The story builds to an emotional zenith and then tumbles back to the point at which it started, much like a wave rising and falling in the ocean. It would be a disservice to print less than the entire text here, but I urge you to enjoy the book on your own.

Writing rhythmically is just as important in easy readers, chapter books and novels. When texts are read silently, shorter sentences actually convey heightened emotion or action, because the eye takes in the entire sentence at once (She stopped. She looked. Then she screamed.) Long, rambling sentences force the reader to slow down and absorb more detail. A balance of the two results in fluid, dynamic writing. Just as spoken dialogue has a distinctive cadence for each character, so does internal dialogue, or thoughts. We tend to think in long sentences that run together, and Gary Paulsen writes this way in *Brian's Winter*, a young adult novel. Here, Brian is practicing shooting with a bow and arrow:

*On the second shot he looked at the target, into the target, drew and held it  
for half a second--focusing all the while on the dirt hump--and when he released  
the arrow with a soft thrum he almost didn't need to watch it fly into the center  
of the lump. He knew where the arrow would go, knew before he released it, knew  
almost before he drew it back.*

*From my brain, he thought, from my brain through my arm into the bow and  
through the string to the arrow it must all be one, and it is all one.*

Every book will have a unique rhythm, dictated by the story and the characters who inhabit it. No matter what kind of story you're writing, pay attention to the beat of the language. Give your voice room to speak to the reader loud and clear.

## Develop Strong Secondary Characters

Authors spend a lot of time developing their main characters. But very few plots involve one character acting in a vacuum. Other people inhabit the character's world, and they're just as important to the story.

Secondary characters provide essential dramatic elements to the plot structure. They can be a force working against the protagonist (adding tension and suspense); provide support (giving advice or information that enables the hero solve her problem); or they may have their own agenda that intersects the protagonist's story at crucial points, turning the plot in a new direction. In any role, secondary characters give the story a texture and dimension that makes it much more interesting to read.

Regardless of the type of book you're writing, every secondary character should have a distinct purpose in the story. It's assumed that the world your protagonist lives in is inhabited by all sorts of people: neighbors, store clerks, students in other grades, garbage collectors and postal workers. But unless these people directly affect the outcome of the plot, they shouldn't appear in the book. Your story covers a specific period of time in your character's life involving a series of related events. Anything not included in those events is superfluous.

Picture books and easy readers have the fewest number of secondary characters. It's impossible to adequately develop more than 2-3 characters in 1500 words or less. Often, these secondary characters have one note. This doesn't mean they're simple, predictable, or one-dimensional, but that the author emphasizes one aspect of the character's personality that best advances the story. For example, in Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, Max's mother only appears in the book on one page, when she calls him a "Wild thing!" and sends him to bed without his supper. Sendak didn't go into a description of Max's argument with Mom, or her exasperation at his behavior. All the text needs to imply is the power struggle between mother and child; Max's expression as he stares at the closed bedroom door says he feels he's been treated unfairly. In the final scene, Max returns home to find his hot supper waiting in his room, showing that Mom's also sorry they squabbled. We never see Mom in the illustrations; the suggestion of her presence just beyond the page is more powerful.



The Wild Things themselves are "terrible"-- terrible roars, terrible teeth, terrible eyes, terrible claws. Sendak allows the pictures to fill in the other elements of character. We only need to know that though the Wild Things look intimidating, they do whatever Max decrees. Are any of the Wild Things smart? Does one like chocolate? The reader doesn't know, because they act as a group--their individual personalities aren't essential to Max's story.

In novels, the secondary characters do have distinct roles, and so they are more fully developed. In Louis Sachar's chapter book *Marvin Redpost: Alone in His Teacher's House*, for ages 6-9, Marvin is hired by his teacher to dog-sit while she's out of town. Her dog is very old, and declines rapidly under Marvin's conscientious care, finally dying the day before Mrs. North returns. But Sachar injects some humor into the somber story via Marvin's two best friends. The boys are fascinated with the idea of being inside their teacher's house, grilling Marvin on what's hanging in her closets, the food in her refrigerator, and what her bathroom looks like.

Middle grade and young adult novels have sub-plots, many of which feature secondary characters. Chris Crutcher's YA novels, for example, tend to have large casts, with each person involved in the main storyline and often 1-2 sub-plots as well. In order for these characters to be so important to the book, the reader has to know their past and understand their motivations for acting as they do in the present story. Every character (even the adults, who often get shortchanged in children's novels) becomes a vital link in the chain of the plot. If one was removed, a big portion of the book would disappear.

Well-developed secondary characters add an extra dimension to any work of fiction, contributing to the overall believability of the story. Make sure yours are integral to the plot, and give them the attention they deserve.

## Develop the Four Traits of Successful Authors

Several years ago, Anastasia Suen sent us this note, which still appears on our web site: “Yesterday’s mail brought copies of *Hodgepodge*, with my poem on the back page, and an acceptance letter from *Babybug* for another poem! My poems in *Shoofly* will be out in April. ALL these leads came from CBI! Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

If you go to Anastasia's own web site today ([www.asuen.com](http://www.asuen.com)) you'll see that she's the author of 78 books, a writing teacher at Southern Methodist University, she leads eight online writing workshops, speaks at numerous conferences, and gets \$1000 per day for a full- day school visit (\$1500 if she has to travel). We like to think of Anastasia as our own personal CBI-success story, but really we can't take any of the credit. Anastasia did it because she's got what it takes to be a prolific, published children's book author. One thing Anastasia, and other writers like her, has is a certain stick-to-it mentality that says, "I want this, I can do this, and I absolutely won't give up." My son's been taking karate for 18 months, and every time he tests for the next rank (he's up to his blue belt now), fewer kids who started with him as white belts test alongside him. It's not that Matthew's necessarily a better athlete than they are, but karate is more important to him. He likes learning the forms, and he enjoys surviving a two hour, physically grueling test knowing that most of his friends would have been flattened in the first 20 minutes. When aspiring writers start identifying themselves as authors, just as Matthew sees himself as a martial artist, they've taken that first big step toward success.

But there's a difference between wanting to see your name on a book, and wanting a career as a children's book author. Anyone with a few bucks can publish their own story, and many books are perfectly suited to be self-published titles given to family and friends. The career mentality, however, is more complex. Check out some common characteristics below and see how you measure up:

**Humility:** When I get emails from people saying, "I'm going to be the next Dr. Seuss," I cringe. Confidence is fine, but don't compare yourself to someone like Dr. Seuss right out of the gate. In fact, don't compare yourself to anyone. Work on finding your own style and voice. And know that you don't have to become a literary

institution to be a success. Learning to write well is a lifelong process, and the writers who get published understand that each manuscript, whether it sells or not, teaches them something. They're not afraid to be critiqued or edited. They've put their heart into a book or article, and then removed their ego. They understand that if their critique group or editor says a plot is too predictable, it's far better to chuck the storyline and start over than to fight to preserve a mediocre manuscript. And they're grateful for the input that saved them from dozens of rejection letters.

**Will Work for Resumé:** Successful authors know that their query letters are more impressive if they can list some publishing credits. They're willing to write for little or no money at first, because the experience of meeting a deadline and working with an editor is invaluable. They may decide to sell one story to a magazine that buys all rights so their next story can be sold to a bigger publication that purchases first rights only. They'll submit to local magazines, regional publishers and small presses as they perfect their manuscripts intended for larger, national publishers. Well-published authors don't overlook any market that might be right for a particular work. And when you're just starting out, seeing your byline in a local parenting publication is just as satisfying as appearing in *Highlights for Children*.

**'Tensity:** Matthew's karate teacher urges him to be intense about his practice, and Matthew's dubbed this mindset "'tensity.'" The prolific writers I know think the same way. Though most have families and jobs, they live, eat and breathe writing. Any spare moment is devoted to working on a manuscript. Free weekends are spent at conferences and workshops. When they're not writing, they're reading children's books. As soon as they get one manuscript in the mail, they start the next one. In fact, supersuccessful authors work on several manuscripts at once. If they're uninspired to revise a scene from their novel, they'll write a query for an article idea or do research for a picture book biography. You don't have to maintain this level of activity to become published. Most writers don't. But if you want to make a living as a children's book author, if you want your web site to list 50 or more books in print, then it's practically required.

**Plays the Field:** Well-published authors don't limit themselves to one genre. They'll write picture books, novels, short stories for magazines, poetry, nonfiction, and material for adult markets such as parenting magazines or writing newsletters. After one book comes out they don't wait for their editor to ask for another manuscript; they create what inspires them and if it's not right for their current editor, they market it

someplace else. In fact, it's more difficult to get widely-published if you only write one type of book. A publisher carries a limited number of titles per season, and the editor of your middle grade novel might not appreciate your having another novel for the same age group come out with a different publisher simultaneously. But a magazine article or nonfiction picture book won't compete with a book for older kids, and still gets your name in front of reviewers and book buyers.

Successful authors don't dabble in writing now and then, they embrace it and do whatever it takes to get published because it's what they want more than anything else. So dive in, work with 'tensity, and send us a quote for our web site when you hit the jackpot.

## Eliminate Passive Writing

According to Strunk and White's classic *The Elements of Style*, "The habitual use of the active voice...makes for forcible writing." In its most basic sense, the active voice involves the subject of the sentence being the doer of the action, whereas in the passive voice the subject is being acted upon. Editors often take it a step further, admonishing authors to eliminate passive writing from their work. Editors look for tight sentences, concrete details and vivid action. The difference between active and passive always starts with the verbs. Look at these two sentences:

*The trunk was opened by Adam.*

*Adam opened the trunk.*

The second sentence is stronger and more direct because we can see Adam carrying out the action. Flipping the sentence around also makes Adam the subject. If the reader is following Adam through the story, he should be the focus of the sentence. Though the second sentence is now in the active voice, it's still not as powerful as it could be. Adjusting the verb can add further meaning to the text. Adam pried open the trunk (it's old with rusty hinges); Adam unlocked the trunk (he used a key); Adam busted open the trunk (he used a hammer); Adam sawed apart the trunk (the trunk is now in several pieces). Each sentence gives the reader a different visual image, and tells us something about Adam.

Don't distance the reader from the verb. She would go to music lessons after school can be rewritten as She went to music lessons after school. "Began to" almost always makes a sentence fall flat: It began to rain as she walked home, making her homework wet. Instead, eliminate "began to" and highlight the important aspect of the sentence: As she walked home, drizzle dampened her homework.

Use positive, straightforward sentences whenever possible. Strunk and White say, "The reader is dissatisfied with being told only what is not; he wishes to be told what is." Look at the following examples; the second sentence in each pair eliminates the negative.

*It was no longer raining. / The rain had stopped.*

*Amy did not pay any attention to her teacher when he gave instructions for the homework. / Amy ignored her teacher's homework instructions.*

*Sam did not like walking home by himself. / Sam hated walking home alone.*

Don't overqualify statements. Words like almost, always, some, very, many, somewhat, slightly, rather, quite or perhaps make the text sound as if you're circling around the story, rather than getting directly to it. These terms signify uncertainty. If you're striving for an uncertain tone to your narrative, then use these words sparingly. In most cases, though, the reader wants the author to write with confidence.

Eliminating passive writing takes practice, but it's worth it. Once all those extra words and murky verbs drop away, your story will take center stage.

## **Jumpstart Your Writing By Asking "Why?"**

When developing a story or article, writers learn to incorporate the "who," "when," "where," and "how." But what often gets overlooked is the "why." Without examining why a story takes place, or why an article would be of interest to the reader, the entire writing experience can be a fruitless exercise.

### **Why this character?**

At a writing conference I once critiqued a manuscript featuring a character in a situation where you wouldn't normally expect to find him. When I wondered why he was there, the author answered, "He just is." "But how did he get there?" I asked. "One of the other characters put him there," the author stated. "Why?" I pushed. The author didn't have an answer.

If you arbitrarily think it would be cute to have a monkey, a doll, or a policeman as your story's protagonist, the reader's not going to care unless it makes sense to have that character inhabit your particular plot. And if a monkey shows up where he shouldn't be--at school, for instance--why he's there has to be an integral part of the story. But more than that, the reader has to know why this monkey is suddenly sitting in a first grade classroom. What's unique about the character that makes him the only monkey who could possibly appear in this book?

### **Why this story?**

Just as important as knowing why your character inhabits your book is understanding why this character experiences the conflict or problem that fuels the plot. Your readers have to believe this protagonist would encounter these obstacles, and not be able to resolve the problem in a few lines of text. Not every child is afraid of the dark, so if your character hides under the covers when the lights are out, plant something in her personality that causes this behavior.

How the plot conflict is resolved also harks back to "why." Why does your character take these particular steps, instead of an easier or more obvious route, to reach his goal? What fears, hang-ups or quirks does the character have to overcome to get what

he wants? Would a child understand and care about these traits? Have you laid the groundwork in the beginning of the story so the reader believes the character could not possibly act any other way, thus never forcing the reader to question you in the first place?

### **Why this article?**

Virtually any nonfiction topic can hold a child's interest if it's presented in the right way. But first ask yourself why you're writing this article or book. Does it have a direct application to the experiences of your readers? Can it tie in with what they're learning in school? Will it enrich their lives in some way? If your motivations are clear, then take a hard look at your audience. Why would kids this age be interested in this topic? How can you present the material in a way that's entertaining as well as informative? If you find you're working hard to shape the information to fit a specific audience or format, perhaps you need to rethink your approach. Maybe you're trying to write too young, and the subject really requires an older reader. Or perhaps you assume middle graders will be fascinated with an animal alphabet book, but after researching other ABC books on the market, you learn they're really targeted to much younger children.



## Let Your Plot Flow From Your Characters

Over the years I've talked about writing fiction and the techniques of letting the plot flow from the characters. I've mentioned how the main character needs to be complex enough to have a problem the reader will care about. I've pointed out how, without conflict, there is no story.

This all makes sense to me, but I've realized after years of teaching writing workshops that it doesn't always make sense to others. I think it's because certain terms--conflict, tension, problem--might be off-putting to some people who want to create children's books. These words evoke visions of school violence, divorced parents and teen pregnancies.

So if the terms are too limiting for you, then throw out the terminology. Try a different approach. I suggest you start by asking yourself four questions:

- What does your character want? Think about a very specific goal your character desires. Ideally, it should be a goal that arises for your character near the beginning of the book, and can be defined in one sentence. So don't worry about what your 13-year-old protagonist wanted for his seventh birthday when at this point in his life all he wants is to make the school basketball team.
- Why? Why does your character have this goal? Here's where you really brainstorm, because you're delving inside your character's head. There need to be elements to her personality that make this goal important. Does she want to prove something to her mother? Is he afraid of being laughed at by his friends? Does she push herself to be perfect? Is he looking for an identity? Don't stop at the first idea that presents itself; explore each reason and brainstorm further. Points related to the main "why" can become sub- plots in novels.
- What is going to help your character? Your character will have strengths and talents that help him achieve his goal. He'll also have friends, family, neighbors, pets, etc., who assist along the way. The setting could be important, or life events such as starting a new school or taking a trip. List everything you think your character needs to get what he wants. Then go through and

eliminate anything that's not absolutely essential. Only those secondary characters who directly affect your protagonist's life during the time span of the plot should be included.

- What is going to stand in your character's way? This is a sneaky way of working in the ideas of conflict and tension into your plot. Without any obstacles, your character will easily achieve her goal. Though some adults think a tension-free plot is satisfying to young readers, in reality it's boring. So brainstorm some roadblocks and pitfalls. Think of traits your protagonist has that will work against her (if she's too perfect, readers won't care about her). Jot down any enemies or even people who are indifferent to your character's fate. Add ideas for other external forces--such as nature, the time period or physical setting, or political events--that might stand in your character's way. Then go back to your "help" column and make sure the character has the tools necessary to overcome the obstacles.

Once you've answered these questions, you'll have enough information to begin devising a plot. This technique can work for any genre, including historical fiction (Mary wants to help the wounded Union soldier who appeared at her door in the middle of the night. Why? He reminds her of her brother. What's standing in her way? Her loyalties to her father and brothers, who are off fighting in the Confederate army; her mother; her neighbors; her strict upbringing....); mysteries (Josh wants to find out who spray painted riddles on the walls of the school. Why? He's always dreamed of being a detective, and he also wants to find the answer to one of the riddles...); science fiction, fantasy, humor and contemporary fiction. The answers to the questions will be influenced by the genre (roadblocks in a fantasy will be very different from those in a contemporary novel), but the process remains the same.

So if the idea of adding conflict to your character's life makes you nervous, or if "tension" reminds you of Stephen King and you're writing a picture book, try a different method. Ask yourself the four questions above, and you'll reveal all the information you need to begin crafting an interesting, believable and emotional story.

## Master Backstory

My son, like many ten-year-old boys, loves video games. He especially likes games where two characters are racing each other, trying to find some sort of treasure, or fighting one another. In other words, where there's a competition and someone loses at the end. I didn't understand the appeal (especially with the race/ chase scenarios) until one day he told me all about the characters in his favorite game; where they came from, how they got there, and what special skills each one has. "How do you know this?" I asked. (I'd played this game with him, and had failed to see any point other than run-as-fast-as-you-can.) "The game tells you," he said, and then he showed me. At the beginning of the game each player gets to choose his character, and learns all about this character's past. Some games allow the players to fashion characters with particular attributes, though each strength comes with a corresponding weakness. The games let the players have some control over the characters, and therefore affect the outcome.

What these video games are doing, I realized, is providing a backstory for the current "story line" between the characters on the screen. The player knows who these characters are, why they're present in the game, and what's at stake. The player also knows what the characters can and can't do, and has to make choices based on those skills. Would Matthew be as interested in a game featuring two generic creatures who seem to appear out of nowhere and mindlessly run for their lives? I doubt it.

The term "backstory" has other meanings in different contexts, but I'm using it here to signify everything that's happened in your character's life prior to page 1 of your manuscript. If your main character is a 10-year-old girl, she's had 10 years of living before the reader meets her for the first time. We're all products of our past, and so your fictional characters must bring some baggage with them into your story. In order for us to care about your main character we must understand how she arrived at the point in her life where your story begins, why she feels as she does about the situation, what's at stake (or what the character stands to lose), the strengths she might build on to solve her problem, and the weaknesses that will stand in her way. Backstory is power, for the reader as well as the character. The backstory holds all the keys to solving the mystery or reaching a goal. And backstory, I believe, is why kids love to read scary books.

Scary stories aren't new. The Grimm Brothers were masters of the gruesome fairy tale ending (though many experts believe the original stories weren't meant for children). Roald Dahl, R.L. Stine, Philip Pullman and J.K. Rowling are just a few of the many authors who have made a name for themselves by exploring the darker side of human nature. I'm convinced one reason Lemony Snicket's "A Series of Unfortunate Events" books fly off the shelves into the hands of eight-, nine- and ten-year-olds is because of the backstory. The three Baudelaire children lose their parents and their home in a mysterious fire early in the first book. But before tragedy strikes, we're informed of their assets: Violet is a brilliant inventor, Klaus a bookworm who remembers everything he's ever read, and Sunny a toddler with razor sharp teeth. Their parents love them and the children take care of each other. These strengths, the reader knows, will always outfox the evil Count Olaf. So though the children are forced to fight for their lives over and over, we're confident they'll emerge in one piece. After Matthew finished *The Bad Beginning*, the first in the series, he asked, "Is this a true story?" When I told him no, he sighed and said, "That's too bad."

If you're writing scary stories, or books where your characters are in danger, give your characters a solid backstory. Don't make them perfect, but do make them competent. It's a powerful secret between the character and the reader. The bad guys never know what these characters have up their sleeves. In many ways, scary stories are a gift to young readers. In the real world, terrible things happen and we don't always have control over the outcome. As I'm writing this I'm listening to new reports of a tsunami that originated off the coast of Indonesia and killed at least 60,000 people. This tragedy wasn't born from hate or politics or poverty; the earth hiccupped, and all those people could do was try to get out of the way. Scary books in which characters solve their problems through innate strength, cunning or talent can be a refuge from the real world. They're cathartic, they're fun, and at the very least, they gives kids hope.

## **Master Cause and Effect**

When we write fiction, we see the story in our mind long before it's on paper. We know why our characters are acting the way they do because we are familiar with their past and in control of their future. We understand the significance of every event in the plot. But sometimes we forget to tell our readers. Strong fiction depends on a logical progression of cause and effect. In real life—and in fiction—nothing happens in a vacuum; feelings are a response to an event, action is followed by reaction. Three areas where cause and effect are most important are the presentation of the main character, the plot structure, and the story's resolution.

### **The Main Character**

The plot springs from your main character, so this character is the most fully developed and multidimensional person in your story. In order for your story to be interesting, the main character has to encounter an obstacle or conflict, has to want something, or a combination of the two. But the reader must also believe the obstacle your character faces is important. In a sense, this obstacle is the effect of all that's happened before the story started. Mark wants to get on the high school basketball team because he thinks it will make him popular and help him get into college. Why are these things important to Mark? Because his father abandoned the family six months earlier, leaving Mark's mother to raise four kids alone. Because Mark is embarrassed about his poor family, and wants to change his image by becoming a basketball star. Because playing basketball will make him ordinary—one of the guys. All of these reasons are causes for Mark's desire to make the team, and all occurred before page one of the book.

If you simply tell your reader in the first chapter that Mark is trying out for the team, your reader won't understand (or care) why this is so important to him. But since you want to start your book with action and not spend the opening pages explaining your character's motivations, you need to present the conflict early on, then lay out the backstory as the book progresses. In future scenes between Mark and his family you can show why Mark wants to escape through basketball. But if you neglect to show Mark's background, the effect of all that baggage won't ring true with your readers.

Even picture book characters have a backstory. It might not be as complicated as Mark's—perhaps Miranda's afraid of dogs because the German Shepherd next door always barks at her through the fence—but readers still need to understand the cause of Miranda's disappointment when Santa brings her a puppy for Christmas.

### **The Plot Structure**

Each scene in your book must be a logical extension of scenes that came before. As you begin a new chapter, ask yourself if you've laid the proper groundwork in previous chapters for the scenes you're about to write. Don't manipulate the plot so your story will conveniently end up where you'd like. If you find your plot twisting in an unexpected direction, go back and revise previous sections so readers will understand this new development. Every moment of suspense or tension in your story should be a result of an earlier scene.

### **The Resolution**

If the plot unfolds in a logical, cause-and-effect pattern, it will end with an unavoidable resolution. Who the character is, how he or she changed during the story, and how that character chose to deal with the conflict should lead to only one conclusion.

The reader must be able to look back from the end of the book and see one path that travels directly from the first page to the last. The resolution (the effect of all that's gone before) will be satisfying and believable if the cause is believable. If someone pops up in the last chapter holding the key to the solution of the book's problem, the chain of cause and effect is broken. Writing fiction is like building a house. The foundation must be strong, and each row of bricks has to stand squarely on the row beneath. If the foundation—the premise of your book—is shaky, the whole house could cave in. If one wall is higher than the other, the roof will be crooked. Your story as a whole depends on the strength of each piece, and the entire structure must be solid for the house to stand.

## Master Simile and Metaphor

At some point in Junior High School (I think--I've tried to forget that era of my life), we learned about similes and metaphors. And we wrote such literary gems as, "The moon is a big, white light bulb floating in the night sky."

Every writer has to start somewhere.

In case you too have blocked out those formative years, here's a refresher: a simile compares two unlike nouns, often using "like" or "as" (This room is hot as an oven.), and a metaphor actually applies a word or phrase to an object it does not literally denote, suggesting a comparison (It's an oven in here.) Still confused? From a strictly utilitarian standpoint, when you're describing something with a comparison in your writing, the terminology really doesn't matter. What is important is that you stay true to the viewpoint of your narration, your audience, and the voice of your characters.

A well-crafted simile can be magical. My favorite is the Prologue of Natalie Babbitt's middle grade novel *Tuck Everlasting*. It begins like this: The first week of August hangs at the very top of summer, the top of the live-long year, like the highest seat of a Ferris wheel when it pauses in its turning. Like all good similes it brings forth an instant reaction from the reader; a visual of the top seat of the Ferris wheel, suspended over the action below; an emotional connection with the stillness that marks the dog days of summer and the anticipation of what's to come. As Babbitt develops the comparison, she looks down on the actions of her principal characters from a removed, omniscient viewpoint, and then crafts metaphors between the setting and her opening image: The wood was at the center, the hub of the wheel. All wheels must have a hub. A Ferris wheel has one, as the sun is the hub of the wheeling calendar.

Metaphors are hard to write convincingly. The image has to be one that touches the reader on a visceral level, and evokes all the feelings the author intends. A younger reader might not understand the association between a Ferris wheel and the different events described in Babbitt's Prologue that are spinning around Treegap wood, but a middle grader can appreciate the pure yet sophisticated connection. More importantly, the reader must be willing to believe the metaphor. Metaphors by definition are

untruths--a hot room isn't actually an oven; Babbit's characters aren't physically revolving around Treegap wood as if attached to a wheel. Therefore, metaphors require a specific narrator, preferably a trustworthy one. The narrator is telling us "This is the way things are," and we have to believe the narrator sees the world on these terms. Babbit, a masterful writer, can pull off a metaphor in the omniscient viewpoint because she herself is the narrator--she adopts a storyteller's voice at the beginning of the tale and then slowly steps back and lets the plot and characters take over. But in most cases, metaphors are filtered through the eyes of the main character. In Patricia MacLachlan's middle grade novel *Arthur, For the Very First Time*, 10-year-old Arthur writes everything he observes in his journal. When he visits his aunt and uncle's farm, this is his first impression: The house was a book, and Uncle Wrisby and Aunt Elda the characters. This metaphor fits with everything we know about Arthur, and so we accept that he indeed sees the house as a book.

Similes are easier, and can be more effective for younger readers. They are used most often for visual descriptions. William Steig wrote this simile in *Gorky Rises*, a picture book: The lights of a town came on way beneath him and Gorky realized he was no longer moving at all, but was suspended in the heavens like a coat on a hanger. Even four-year-olds know coats on hangers hang motionless from their shoulders. MacLachlan, a gifted descriptive writer, uses similes to create a visual representation of her characters' feelings. In her chapter book *Caleb's Story*, Caleb writes in his journal: In Anna's journal the words walk across the page like bird prints in the mud. But it is hard for me. In *Everything on a Waffle*, Polly Horvath establishes the dramatic flair of her first-person narrator Primrose Sharp with this description: I have hair the color of carrots in an apricot glaze (recipe to follow), skin fair and clear where it isn't freckled, and eyes like summer storms.

Similes and metaphors are wonderful writing tools. The best ones stretch beyond the obvious comparisons while keeping with the tone of the story and the voice of the narrator. Practice them, play with them, and someday you'll develop a new, better way to describe the moon.



## Master the Five Types of Plots

More than 60 years ago, writing teacher Odessa Davenport analyzed hundreds of children's picture books, novels and magazine stories and discovered that all fiction fell into one of five basic plot patterns. Author Jane Fitz-Randolph learned the patterns, proved them in her own writing, and taught them to her students. Based on their work, here's a summary of the plot types found in fiction:

**Linear Incidents.** This is the simplest pattern, and works best for board books or picture books for the younger end of the audience (ages 2-5). In the linear incident story, the main character is involved in a series of events and responds to each one before moving on. The stories are sequential --one thing happens, then the next, then the next--with each scene having equal weight and the action moving along quickly toward a satisfying or funny climax. The character is not striving to achieve a goal, and ends the story essentially the same person as he or she was at the beginning. *In If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* by Laura Joffe Numeroff, illustrated by Felicia Bond, the humor of incidents and the charm of the characters carry the book.

**Accomplishing a Purpose or Goal.** The first part of the story involves the main character struggling toward a well- defined purpose or goal that seems impossible to fulfill. The middle of the book shows the character making gains and experiencing setbacks, until the story's point of crisis and climax. In the end the character will have achieved his purpose (or solved his problem) through his own deliberate actions.

This pattern requires careful plotting, because the outcome must evolve naturally and reasonably from the situation and the main character. The character also needs to achieve his purpose by using courage (physical, moral, or both), ingenuity, special capacity (a natural or acquired special ability, either physical or intellectual), or a combination of the three. One picture book example is *Too Many Pumpkins* by Linda White, illustrated by Megan Lloyd.

**A Wish Granted.** In these stories, the character also begins by wanting something that is almost impossible to achieve. However, the character makes no effort (or a small effort, which is quickly abandoned) to make her dream come true. Dramatic and interesting events follow, which seem to have no relation to the character's wish. But

in the end the character does get her wish-- or an acceptable substitute-- as a logical result of everything that's happened in the story. The character ultimately gets what she wants because of who she is (her personality, her talents, etc.), or because of an unselfish action done with no thought of using that action to get the wish. *Cinderella* is one classic example.

**Misunderstanding, Realization and Change.** This story begins with the main character harboring a genuine, deeply- held misunderstanding of a situation, another person, or himself. The character proceeds to act based on this misunderstanding. The book's middle consists of dramatic events that lead the character to question his beliefs. But the character holds onto his convictions more tightly than ever, until he discovers in a climactic moment that he has been mistaken. The dramatic events of the plot must lead directly to the character's discovery-- he can't be told how to think by another character, or accidentally stumble upon new information. In a definitive act by the main character, he chooses to reverse his way of thinking just before the story's end.

This is an appealing plot pattern for all ages, but can easily slide into preaching to the reader. Allow characters to make their own discoveries through the events of the plot, as Lois Lowry does in her young adult novel *The Giver*.

**Moral Dilemma.** Though this story type can be used for any age group, it's especially powerful in novels. The main character has a clear problem that can't be solved easily. The problem requires the character to make an immediate decision between a morally right and morally wrong course of action. The best choice may or may not be initially clear to the character, but in any case the morally right choice will bring her trouble, and the morally wrong option will bring relief or satisfaction. The reader must care about the character in order to be invested in the outcome.

The middle of the book involves the character vacillating between her two choices, leaning more heavily toward doing what's morally wrong. The end brings events that cause the character to make the right decision, but these events must be a logical outcome of everything that's previously happened in the story. Once the decision is made, the story ends quickly. This is illustrated in Marion Dane Bauer's riveting middle grade novel *On My Honor*.

## Organize Your First Draft

Writing the first draft of your book is a fun, artistic endeavor. But having a road map can help keep you from getting too far off track, so the revision process will be less daunting. Here are some points to consider before the creative juices flow: Define your characters: What qualities does your main character have that makes him or her the focus of your story idea? What strengths and weaknesses will cause twists in the plot? Your character should have internal conflicts that he or she brings to the story (personality traits that cause tension, such as a fear that must be overcome, shyness, or a hot temper) and external conflicts (things that happen to the character) that make up the book's plot. If you're writing character-centered nonfiction, such as a biography or a book about an event that centers around key players, knowing the makeup of the people featured is just as important as in fiction.

**Chart the beginning:** When writing fiction, it's helpful to know the story's catalyst. This is the moment where everyday life changes for your character from ordinary to extraordinary. It's an event that starts the plot rolling. It might be the announcement by a character's best friend that he's moving, or a fire that destroys the protagonist's house, or the appearance of the main character's father who was presumed dead. It happens early in the story, and presents a problem the character must resolve by the end of the book. You can't tell a story without a catalyst. You should also know how your main character is going to react to this particular problem, and why.

Nonfiction also needs a spark to get the book rolling. Write out the key questions you'll address during your book, and brainstorm on how you can introduce these questions to readers in the first chapter (or first paragraphs of a nonfiction picture book) that will grab them and keep them reading.

**Organize the middle:** Nonfiction writers almost always work from an outline. A few sentences describing what will be covered in each chapter helps you see what to research, and whether your idea is complex enough for a book. Nonfiction picture book writers outline to determine what to leave in, and what to cut. As you gather information and refine your idea, plug details into your outline. The more specific you get, the easier it will be to write your first draft.

Fiction writers often worry that outlining will curb their creativity, but simply bulleting the main plot points can keep the story flowing in the right direction. Even a few words about what needs to happen in each chapter will help with the pacing. But remember, this is a first draft. Don't worry too much about deviating from your outline. You might discover that tangent you wandered down actually makes the story stronger.

**Foresee the ending:** Fiction has a climax (sometimes called the resolution) in which the main character solves his or her problem presented in the catalyst. If you know how your protagonist will resolve this problem, then you'll see what steps the plot needs to take to get there. But writers don't always know where the story will end up when they begin. That's fine, but it helps to understand the type of solution your character needs to achieve in order for the ending to be satisfying for the reader.

Nonfiction needs some sort of conclusion that sums up the information presented in the book, or answers the questions posed at the beginning. Knowing what points you want your reader to walk away with will help you develop the book so it logically leads to those conclusions.

## Show, Don't Tell

An interview with Josephine Nobisso, author of *Show; Don't Tell! Secrets of Writing*

*Q: Your book is such a simple, logical, almost obvious way of teaching "show; don't tell" and yet no one's thought of it before.*

A: I so agree that it's so simple! In fact, for many years I conducted a writing program on the smallest scale, reasoning, "This works so well, and is so easy that there can't be anything new here. Everyone must be teaching writing this way!" Then, one day, a woman sat in to observe a program I was doing gratis in our library's children's room. When it was over, she introduced herself as directress of Arts-in-Education in our county, and said something like, "This absolutely revolutionizes the way writing should be taught! You must offer it to every school in the county!"

I took her card, and even though she seemed a most sincere person, I didn't believe I was on to anything valuable. There was NO way I was going to prance into schools to exasperate professionals with something they must already know! I asked our reference librarian to order every book and tract on writing he could find. Over weeks, the more I looked through piles of these, the more I saw that the directress had been correct. I began to believe that my approach could actually serve someone.

The only thing I change when presenting these grammar-based tips to writers, teachers, parents, editors, etc. is the vocabulary. A case in point: *Show; Don't Tell! Secrets of Writing* is written so that children may understand its subtleties; this article is written for the adult's more profound grasp of those subtleties.

*Q: Why is "show; don't tell" such an important skill for strong writing?*

A: In order to remember the weakening tendencies, I'll use the anagram AGES. Writing that "tells" analyzes, generalizes, editorializes and summarizes. Even though the act of writing certainly engages these cognitive functions, writing IS ALL ABOUT (and this is the single most distinguishing difference between "professional" and "aspiring" writing) shifting these functions into the domain of the reader. In order for the reader to have that satisfying and interactive "pop off the page" sensory and

intellectual experience, the writing must "show" so that the reader's own intelligence brings him to the conclusions the writer is communicating, or convinces him of the details the writer is sharing.

*Q: You say that you incorporate "grammar- based" strategies into this book. Can adult authors of children's books benefit from this technique as well?*

*A: Show; Don't Tell! Secrets of Writing* sets out to prove that the solid use of grammar creates a golden key that accesses those mysterious intangibles of a writer's mind: the imagination (fiction), the memory (nonfiction), and the will (perhaps some mix of the two!) We have been taught that there are eight parts of speech, but six of them are ancillary to the two principle ones: the noun and the verb. *Show; Don't Tell!* is about the nature of nouns (and its servant, the adjective.) Its sequel *Cross It Out! More Secrets of Writing* will be about that of verbs (and its modifier, the adverb.)

For example, never end a description on a describing word-- even a sophisticated describing word. It will force you into AGES! Instead of describing ("telling"), She was self-sacrificing, NAME (using specific nouns and revealing adjectives, to "show") what her self-sacrificing behavior looked like, sounded like, etc. Kate knelt on her bruised knees. "Poor lost kitty!" she cried.

Will the tips help break ingrained habits? A fellow wordsmith told me that the fact of the tips being obvious "made gates of ignorance lock behind" her.

## Simplify Your Writing

A former workshop student of mine recently thanked me for reminding her that query letters are best when they're short and to the point. A published writer, she said she'd gotten away from the KISS method of querying (Keep It Simple, Stupid).

The more I thought about her acronym, the more I realized it applied to all aspects of writing for children. When dealing with kids one-on-one, we adults often give them information on a need-to-know basis. When asked, "Why do I have to change my underwear every day?" we could go into detail about germs or proper hygiene, but instead answer, "Because you're starting to stink." It gets the point across with minimal verbiage. And that age-old parental justification--"Because I said so"--sometimes is the only reason needed.

So why do we get so complicated when writing for children? Why do our picture book plots span several weeks and contain characters with large extended families and numerous friends? Why do our magazine articles attempt to cram a subject's entire life into 800 words? Kids are masters of cutting through the fog and getting right to the point. Here are some ways we can learn from our audience:

Eliminate adjectives and adverbs. If your nouns and verbs are strong, you won't need to add extra words to describe them. He trudged up the hill says the same thing as He walked slowly and steadily up the hill, placing his feet heavily with each step, only more succinctly. Instead of describing a house as huge, grand, or enormous, let your character do it with one word: Jason gazed at Grandma's house. "It's a castle," he thought. A single, well-chosen noun draws a picture in your reader's mind better than several general adjectives.

Write your plot direction in one sentence. In our Children's Authors' Bootcamp workshops, Linda Arms White and I teach writing a story line as a tool for plotting (This a story about \_\_\_\_\_, who wants more than anything to \_\_\_\_\_, but can't because \_\_\_\_\_.) This story line identifies the main character, his/her greatest goal, and what's standing in the way of the character achieving that goal. Regardless of the length of your story, the age group, or whether you have subplots

and chapters, the story line works to keep the action of your plot on track. The key: Keep it to one sentence (there's no wiggle room on this one).

What if you're not writing about your character achieving his greatest goal, or its flip side, your character avoiding facing his greatest fear? A plot about something your character sort of wants isn't good enough. A conflict involving a minor annoyance isn't as compelling as a life-changing event. Maybe your character is up against so many obstacles that the reader can't figure out which one is the most important. As the author, you need to boil your story down to the one aspect of your character's life that's going to take center stage for the duration of the book. Remember, you're not writing about your character's entire existence, just the period of time encapsulated in your story. One goal shines above the rest. All subplots and secondary characters serve as stepping stones toward that goal. Some lead your character in the right direction, some take detours, but all ultimately end up in the same place.

Give your reader only the information he needs right now. Don't throw in details about a character unless it's directly related to the current action of the story. This often happens with secondary characters, who suddenly develop a phobia or acquire an annoying sibling in the middle of a scene. Such dangling attributes feel contrived and only raise distracting questions in the reader's mind. The same goes for a character's life before the story began. We generally don't need to know the past of every person who appears in the book. Reveal as much information as the reader must have to understand what's happening at each point of the plot, and cut the rest.

Use the "need-to-know" philosophy with query letters. When composing a query letter or cover letter to an editor, include only the information an editor needs to judge whether he or she may be interested in reading your manuscript. Your motivation for writing the story doesn't matter; your ability to summarize the plot in a few sentences does. Your experience as a parent or grandparent doesn't guarantee you'll write a strong article; your adherence to the magazine's word limit shows you've done your research. Editors are busy people who love short letters with lots of white space. Respect the simplicity of presenting your work with minimal buildup and letting your manuscript speak for itself.

Above all, keep your message clear and age-appropriate. A picture book about poverty is too broad and abstract for a six-year-old to understand, but a story about a child who is embarrassed because she gets free lunch at school is more specific.



Whatever age you're writing for, use one well- defined character to represent the bigger issue. Smaller, intimate stories are more relevant to the reader. Nonfiction that shows the reader how the topic relates to his life, or focuses on one aspect of a subject, makes a greater impact. And remember, if you want your manuscript to sell, start with a KISS.

## Stop a Reader in His Tracks

If you love books, you can probably think of several occasions when you've been stopped in your tracks by a unique turn of phrase or a magical description. "How did the author do that?" you wonder. "It's so simple, and yet so profound."

Authors get involved in the big picture when creating a book, and rightly so. We need to think about aspects of character, plot, setting, conflict, development and resolution. We must view the overall structure to ensure that it's sound. But once that story's down on paper and we know it's not going anywhere, we can start concentrating on the words. The forest is planted; now take a look at the trees.

Think again about those track-stopping experiences you've had when reading. What else do you remember about the book? If occasional groupings of words overshadowed the story, then the author was struggling to sound writerly at the expense of the plot. However, if individual words and phrases melded seamlessly together to create a satisfying experience from beginning to end, then the words and the story had equal weight.

As a children's book writer, how do you entice readers with your words, the essential building blocks of any type of writing, without overshadowing the other elements that make up your book? The answer: Keep it simple.

Skilled authors use everyday language in new, exciting ways. One of my favorite picture book examples is from Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. Max is sailing across the ocean to meet the wild things for the first time. Instead of telling us the ocean is "very big" or Max travels for "a long time," Sendak takes advantage of young children's budding fascination with calendars:

*...and he sailed off through night and day  
and in and out of weeks  
and almost over a year  
to where the wild things are.*

It's a poetic description of time, and fits perfectly with the poetic tone of the rest of the text.

Memorable description happens when the writer pairs disparate images to create a new picture infused with emotion. The feelings make the place seem familiar to the reader. Here's the opening paragraph from Paul Fleischman's middle grade novel *The Borning Room*:

*Four small walls, sheathed with pine, painted white. A window. A door onto the kitchen, for warmth. Two chairs. A bed, nearly filling up the room, like a bird held in cupped hands. Standing by the bed, squire beside his knight, a table bearing a Bible and a lamp. I'm certain you've stood in many such rooms.*

Even if the reader has never stood in such a room, she can see it. The words Fleischman uses are accessible to every reader, and invite her in. The text is not complex--most second graders can read it easily--yet it is rich and interesting. The unadorned language reflects the straightforward nature of the narrator.

The Prologue of Natalie Babbitt's novel *Tuck Everlasting* begins with a metaphor that sets the stage for the tale to follow. Babbitt likens the first week of August to the seat at the top of a Ferris wheel: *...The weeks that come before are only a climb from balmy spring, and those that follow a drop to the chill of autumn, but the first week of August is motionless, and hot.* She goes on to describe that time, her verbs building the tension: sunsets "smeared with too much color"; lightning that "quivers all alone." And then the kicker: These are strange and breathless days, the dog days, when people are led to do things they are sure to be sorry for after.

Surprising the reader is good, and Babbitt jolts the reader out of his dog-days reverie with that last sentence. Joyful images of Ferris wheels and hot summer days are abruptly replaced by the promise of a story about bad decisions. This, then, is what you want your reader to notice about your writing. Not the individual words, not the fancy descriptions, but the overall feeling of being taken for a ride through the story. Pay attention to your words, but don't let them take control. The only way to keep the words from overpowering the story is to always keep it simple.

## Take the Pain Out of Being Critiqued

Being a writer is hard on your ego. First, you put your best efforts (and often your most vulnerable experiences) down on paper for the world to see. Then you had it over to another person to be scrutinized. It's this person's job to praise the good aspects of your work, but also to point out what you did wrong. It's your job to listen to the criticism and remember that this person is helping you, because all your writing's strengths really don't matter if you can't fix the flaws. It's a strange profession in a way, but if you want to be part of it, that's how it works. The reader who is providing all these valuable shots to your ego might be a member of your critique group or an editor. In either case, it's vital that you resist getting defensive and actually consider the constructive criticism. Here are some tips:

**Remember that every writer can get better.** Writers who think their story is perfect after one or two drafts, without having it critiqued by people who can be objective and who know something about children's books, are fooling themselves. Many published authors have told me that the single biggest factor in their success was their critique group. It's impossible for you to fairly judge your own work. And if you dream of having your book received by a wider audience than your own kids, you have to see how other people react when they read it.

**Don't get defensive.** It's tempting to argue with the person offering suggestions for revisions. If you do this too much, your critiquer probably won't want to read your next revision. You don't have to agree with every criticism, but do write them all down and think them over in a day or two. Most of the time, your reader will be right. You may have failed to include a crucial plot detail without realizing it, or perhaps your main character isn't likable enough. Maybe your entire plot structure doesn't hang together. Wouldn't you rather know this now, so you can fix it before receiving a pile of rejection letters?

If you're dealing with an editor, carefully consider all her comments. She's training you to become a better writer. It's within your rights to disagree with your editor, but if you absolutely don't want to make certain changes, be prepared to say why. If you intended for your main character to be unsympathetic, for example, explain to the editor why this choice makes the book better.

**Commit to your writing for the long haul.** "Writer" is a misnomer--"rewriter" would be more accurate. If you acknowledge that it takes several revisions to get the basic structure of your book in place, and then more revisions to fine-tune each sentence, you won't feel devastated when your critique group suggests your main character isn't developed enough or your article lacks a strong premise. It's all just part of the process. Remember that every time you master one more aspect of strong writing, you cut down on the number of revisions you'll need to make on your next manuscript. All the authors you admire go through this same process of writing and rewriting. If you welcome the opportunity to do the same, your book will earn its spot on the shelves next to theirs.

## Think Like a Kid

One of the toughest tasks for writers is to get inside the brain of a child. Sure, we all have our own childhood memories, but those can be spotty at best. And even accurate recollections reflect a different time and a different mindset. The standard advice is to observe and interact with children. Being around kids can give a window into the language and interpersonal dynamics of today's kids. But even this is far from foolproof. Youngsters are thoroughly aware of an adult's presence and may simply be trying hard to be on their best behavior. There is another way, however, that is remarkably efficient and is a surefire way to get an accurate picture of the likes, dislikes and passions of kids: read some magazines.

As the periodical market has become more niche-oriented, editors and publishers have become--by necessity--geniuses in understanding their slice of the audience. The people who put out *Boys' Life*, for example, spend a great deal of time and money working to master the mindset of the grade school boys in whose life Scouting and outdoor adventure play a vital part. Page after page of the magazine reflects this understanding. The vocabulary, pacing, subject matter, article length and design are all tailored specifically to suit this audience. If you hope to write for this niche, becoming familiar with *Boy's Life* is as valuable as attending a dozen Scout Pack meetings--and probably a lot more peaceful.

So here's the plan--for whatever age, gender or special interest group you hope to write for, find their magazines and read them, cover to cover. When you do, consider these points:

- Note how the magazines target a narrow age group and sometimes just one gender. Compare a magazine for early elementary readers to one for ages 9-12, and see how the tone, humor and attitude of the writing changes.
- Some magazines have an educational focus, and others are for entertainment. Notice how the educational publications still capture readers' interest by using jokes or making the topics relevant to kids' lives. On the other hand, the entertainment magazines also strive to profile people who are good role

models, to showcase activities that are worthwhile, and to work within age-appropriate boundaries of good taste.

- Notice how the slant of magazines for girls is different from that for boys. Girls' publications often feature more fiction and poetry; boy's magazines might contain jokes or comic strips. As an exercise, read some "boy" magazines and "girl" magazines for the same age group, and pinpoint their differences. This will help you in creating boy and girl characters for your fiction.
- Peruse some of the actual articles in recent issues. Many magazines have excerpts on their web sites, so you can easily get a sense of what kids are reading (look in the magazine market section of *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market* published by Writer's Digest books for lists of magazines and their web sites), though there's no substitute for thumbing through a hard copy of each publication. This will help you understand not only what kids care about, but what they're learning at school. Educational magazines in particular want articles that can be applied to what children are reading in class. And if you're writing fiction that centers around a character's school experience, you want to get the teacher's lesson plans right.

As a fiction writer, reading children's magazines can help you zero in on what your characters care about, what's going on in their world, and even what they find funny. If you're writing nonfiction, magazines will show you the breadth of interests enjoyed by your target audience, and perhaps point you toward a niche you can fill. So visit your local newsstand and start your research. You may get some funny looks when you're reading *Jack and Jill* at Starbucks, but the publishing contracts will be worth it.

## Title Your Book

I'm not very good with titles. Luckily, I publish an information newsletter, and my subscribers already know that each issue will focus on writing children's books. So an article title simply needs to convey at a glance to the reader whether the piece can be put to use right now, or filed away for later. Book titles, on the other hand, must entice a potential customer to pick up the book, open it, read a few lines, and then buy it. When your customers are children with big demands and short attention spans, your title often becomes your main sales tool.

Picture book titles, like the stories themselves, must be active, concrete, and sound appealing when read out loud. A little surprise doesn't hurt: *Diary of a Worm* by Doreen Cronin, *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* by Mo Williams, and *When the Chickens Went on Strike: A Rosh Hashanah Tale* by Erica Silverman all promise stories of animals acting in very un-animallike ways. Titles can give a clue to the plot and tone of the book but should draw the reader in without giving away the ending (*Hannah Mae O'Hannigan's Wild West Show* by Lisa Campbell Ernst; *Sumi's First Day of School Ever* by Soyung Pak). And don't be afraid to go for a grabber like *Walter, the Farting Dog* by William Kotzwinkle. You may not like the story, but I dare you to walk by the book in a store without wanting to read a few pages.

Chapter books and middle grade novels must appeal to kids more than their parents, so don't use the character's name as the title unless it's very unusual (*Bunnicula* by James and Deborah Howe; *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli). Titles that are funny (*The Stinky Sneakers Contest* by Julie Anne Peters), irreverent (*Your Mother was a Neanderthal* by Jon Scieszka), or relevant to readers' lives (*Gossip Times Three* by Amy Goldman Koss) will give the author immediate credibility. This audience wants to read books about kids just like them, only more so (bigger problems, better clothes, more exciting social lives). Titles that telegraph adolescent angst (*Shakespeare Bats Cleanup* by Ron Koertge; *Rosy Coles' Worst Ever, Best Yet Tour of New York City* by Sheila Greenwald) forge a connection with readers.

Titles of young adult books are often spare, sophisticated, and dramatic. The title may represent an idea from the book rather than the plot, as in Chris Crutcher's *Whale Talk*. Coupled with the cover illustration, the title is intended to intrigue the reader by



presenting the overall tone of the story. Francine Prose's *After*, illustrated by the word spray painted on a bleak, gray brick school wall; Walter Dean Myers' *The Beast*, with the title printed in large orange and yellow letters running bottom to top that almost swallow the black background; and Caroline B. Cooney's *Burning Up* title imposed over an illustration of marshmallows being roasted on a beach bonfire, the flames a little too red, the marshmallows a little too burnt, all tell young adults that these are not their younger siblings' books.

## Turn a Personal Struggle Into a Book

Suppose you've just gone through a divorce and lost custody of your kids. Or a loved one has recently died of cancer. Or you struggled in school as a child because you have dyslexia.

Many writers turn difficult periods in their lives into books for children, hoping to help young readers through similar painful experiences. Here are some tips to keep in mind when creating and selling books based on real-life events:

Remember that you're writing a children's book, not a personal essay intended to purge your soul from a painful memory. Children want to read about how they feel. Many writers create a child character and tell the story through that character's eyes. Don't write in first person if the "I" is you, the adult author. Instead of explaining how bad you feel that your kids no longer live with you, show how a five-year-old character feels about only getting to see Daddy every other weekend.

Books for younger children (up to age eight) centering around a personal crisis are generally most effective if the author uses a fictional vehicle for imparting the information. If you want to stick closer to nonfiction, make sure the book focuses on the child in the center of the event, and is told in a narrative format with a beginning, middle and end. Older children can handle more traditional self-help books, with each chapter concentrating on a specific aspect of the problem. However, interspersing the advice with personal anecdotes from other children who have gone through the same thing will make the information more appealing and relevant to the readers.

Targeting appropriate publishers with these manuscripts is important. Look in subject index of *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market* under "Self Help" and "Special Needs" for publishers. Peruse the children's nonfiction section of a large bookstore, and read reviews in *Publisher's Weekly*, *School Library Journal* and *Horn Book* (trade magazines found in most libraries) to see which publishers do similar types of books. Always send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the children's editorial department asking for writer's guidelines before submitting your manuscript. You can also look at books written for parents to help their children cope with an illness, loss or divorce,

and query the publisher asking if they'd like to publish a children's book on the same topic.

Though many mainstream publishers are interested in books that deal with special issues, some topics have too narrow an audience for a large house to market the book successfully. In this case, many authors have elected to self-publish. If you get several personal rejection letters from editors who praise the book but say the audience isn't broad enough, you might consider publishing it yourself. But self-publishing should be approached cautiously; color illustrations are essential for picture books, making them very expensive to produce. And you must be prepared to devote at least a year of your life to selling and distributing your book.

Most self-published books are sold primarily through direct mail. Can you purchase mailing lists of parents with children who could benefit from your book? Stories on adoption, specific childhood illnesses, or those that might fit in a pediatrician's waiting room or hospital gift shop are examples of books with a very targeted audience. Dan Poynter's *The Self-Publishing Manual* (Para Publishing) and *The Complete Guide to Self-Publishing* by Tom and Marilyn Ross (Writer's Digest Books) are two good resources to check out before making the commitment to self-publish.

## Turn Your Idea Into a Book

Maybe you're one of those lucky writers whose head is bursting with ideas. Or perhaps you have one idea that's been nagging you for weeks, always at the edge of your thoughts. Either way, you're itching to begin writing. That's good. But before you rush headlong into your story, stop and ask yourself one question: Is this just an idea, or is it a book?

Ideas, of course, are the seeds of any work of fiction or nonfiction. But until an idea is fully developed, until you can envision its beginning, middle and end, that one idea might not be enough. The experience of writing for pages about an idea and ultimately getting nowhere (or getting a pile of rejections) has taught many writers to outline their books before they begin. But if the thought of an outline sends shivers up your spine, at least thinking your idea through and making sure it merits months of writing can save you future frustration.

### Ideas for Fiction

A lot of writers, especially when they're beginners, get ideas for fiction from their own lives. This can be useful for several reasons: you're emotionally invested in the topic, you can relate directly to the main character, and if the situation actually happened to you, you're less likely to be unconsciously basing the story on a book you've read. But remember, just because you find this thing that happened to you or your child fascinating, it doesn't mean it will be fascinating to thousands of potential readers. Very often, a real-life event is just that--an event. It's a vivid scene you recall with pleasure, or a family joke that's repeated over and over. It evokes strong emotions when you remember it, perhaps you even look back on an event as a turning point in your life. But only rarely does reality provide a plot.

When writers stick too closely to what really happened they fail to develop the elements necessary for a good story: a believable main character who is faced with a problem or conflict, mounting tension as that character tries to solve her problem and experiences setbacks, and a tension-filled climax followed by a resolution that's satisfying to the character and the reader. If your main character is really your son, you might not want to get him in trouble or throw rocks in his path. But you have to.

It's the only way you'll create a story that will keep readers hooked and wondering how it will end.

Speaking of endings, if the resolution of your story comes too easily, it's probably obvious and predictable. Try mixing up real life and have the situation evolve in a different direction. Surprise yourself, and you'll surprise an editor.

However you get your idea, focus first on whether it's a plot or a theme. Many times, an initial idea is really the underlying meaning of the story, what the author wants to convey to the reader. Themes should be universal in their appeal-- such as friendship, appreciating one's own strengths, not judging others too quickly. Then play around with the sequence of events until you develop a plot (what actually happens in the book) that makes this theme clear to the reader. And remember; if you're using a childhood incident as the foundation of your story, tell it from your childhood viewpoint, not how it feels to you now as an adult.

### **Ideas for Nonfiction**

Your nonfiction book should be based on something you're truly interested in and passionate about. After all, you'll be living with this idea for many months. The key to successful nonfiction is to take your idea and approach it in a way that no one else has ever done before. This means doing most of your research before you begin to write. Don't settle for the most easily-found information on your topic-- your readers have probably read the same information. Keep digging until you find an aspect to your subject that strikes you as unique. Then search through the library and bookstores to make sure no one else has already beat you to it.

For a nonfiction idea to become a book, you need enough information to fill the number of pages necessary, depending on the age group for which you plan to write. Younger children need a foundation of basic facts, but you can also get fairly detailed within the scope of the approach you've chosen as long as you explain concepts in a simple and straightforward manner (how animals hibernate, why insects are different colors). Older readers can draw on a broader foundation of knowledge, and infer connections between your topic and related subjects. A detailed outline of any nonfiction book is essential to help you see if your idea has enough substance and originality, or if you need further research before you begin writing.

Whether it's fiction or nonfiction, your idea should mean something to you, but also have the potential to mean a lot to your readers. Think it through, add to it, take the nonessential elements away, and make sure it has a beginning, middle and end. Only then will your "idea" turn into "an idea for a book."

## Use Humor Effectively

In children's books, funny is always good. Even the weightiest, most sophisticated novel is improved by sparks of humor. A child's sense of humor develops with age and reading level. If you vividly remember what made you laugh when you were six, you're lucky. But most adults can't recall--or worse, don't appreciate--what caused those childhood giggles. Studying funny books for different age groups will help refresh your memory.

Picture book humor is very visual. Funny expressions, a character falling on his backside, or a pie in the face are all hilarious to kids up to eight years old. Children older than five can begin to appreciate the dramatic irony of words that don't quite match the pictures. **My Friend Rabbit** by Eric Rohmann, the 2002 Caldecott winner, is a perfect example. Though the text is sparse, it sets up the jokes delivered in the illustrations. Author/illustrator Peggy Rathmann is a master of visual humor. The humor in her picture books **Goodnight Gorilla** and **10 Minutes till Bedtime** is completely contained within the illustrations, which provide enough tiny details to provoke new laughs with each reading. **Officer Buckle and Gloria**, my personal favorite and another Caldecott winner, requires the juxtaposition of conflicting information from the text and illustrations to get the joke.

Author Beverly Cleary has written that children "enjoy feeling superior to their younger selves and are relieved to know they have grown." Easy reader and chapter book characters often represent these "younger selves" with humor that combines physical elements and a short setup from the dialogue or narrative. **Amelia Bedelia** by Peggy Parish is a classic humorous easy reader for ages 6-8 in which the main character (an adult) takes everything literally, with dramatic, silly results. The reader can see it coming, allowing her to feel smarter than the character. The Captain Underpants series by Dav Pilkey (ages 7- 10) combines subversive humor (a school principal running around in his underwear) with slapstick comedy and witty dialogue. Jon Scieszka's The Time Warp Trio series takes the humor up one notch on the sophistication level, relying on dialogue, the interplay between the three main characters, and the absurdity of modern boys being thrust into different periods of history for the laughs.

Middle grade books (ages 8-12) draw their humor largely from the reader's empathy with the main character. Kids can laugh at the character's predicament while inwardly cringing, thinking "I know how that feels." So the humor is situational, requiring the reader to understand the circumstances surrounding the joke, and all its implications. In **Dear Mrs. Ryan, You're Ruining My Life** by Jennifer B. Jones, Harvey Ryan is a fifth grade boy whose mother is a children's book author. Mrs. Ryan visits Harvey's class every year to talk about her books. As if having your mom come to school isn't embarrassing enough, this year Mrs. Ryan admits that the characters in her books are often based on Harvey himself. When Mrs. Ryan starts dating Harvey's principal...well, it's almost more than a boy can take.

Young adult novels for children over 10 years old combine all the levels of humor introduced in younger books, and can draw out the setup over several pages. The jokes usually come from the characters--who they are physically, emotionally and intellectually; how they react to the situations of the plot; and how they play off each other. Richard Peck is a terrific author to study for eccentric, unexpected, funny characters. Though most of his books are considered middle grade (**A Long Way from Chicago**, the Newbery-winning **A Year Down Yonder**, and **Fair Weather**, to name a few), they are appreciated by older readers and adults as well. **Surviving the Applewhites** by Stephanie Tolan (ages 10 and up) is a new book that gives a fresh spin to the classic "fish out of water" theme.

One of the worst things you can do as a writer is to insult your reader by making the humor too juvenile. So when in doubt, add wisecracking dialogue to a picture book, or facetious interaction in a chapter book. On the other hand, try to appreciate what actually makes kids laugh. Often it's the inherent illogic of a joke that's the tickler. A cow being catapulted through the air may seem stupid to an adult, but to a five-year-old it's hilarious because, let's face it, everyone knows when that cow hits the ground he's going to bounce really high.



## Use Slang in Your Writing

If someone told you to "fade", would you ignore them or guard your wallet? The answer depends not just on who is doing the talking, but when. Joe College in the early 1930's use the term to mean "to leave"; a 1940's zoot-suiter "faded" by covering a bet; it meant "to ignore" in the 1980's hip-hip vernacular; and the youth of the 1990's said something was "fade" when it crimped their style. Simple words--fade, sweet, lamp, dig and cut, to name just a few-- change dramatically when incorporated into the slang of each generation. Usually the meanings have nothing to do with the literal definitions of the terms.

So how much of this colorful verbiage should you use in your writing? Slang immediately dates a book, but that's not necessarily bad. Certain words are closely identified with different eras of American history, so slang can place the story quickly into a specific decade. The way a character talks provides a window for the reader into that character's personality, as well as his age and social class. And since slang originates from the youth culture of the time, the words themselves help portray the prevailing attitudes of teens and young adults. Finally, slang can be fun and interesting to read.

Most slang should be confined to characters' dialogue. If the story is told in first person, slang can be sprinkled sparingly throughout the narrative. Use slang when it's necessary to help define a character or show how one character stands out from the rest. Some slang grew out of subcultures, such as the Beat counterculture of the 1950's or the hip-hop culture of the 1980's and 1990's. Specific jargon helped identify members of these groups and alert the members to the presence of outsiders. Other slang is tied to occupations. If your character is a 1934 soda jerk he might respond to the order of "frankfurter with ketchup and a chocolate malt with egg to go" by shouting, "Hemorrhage a Coney Island chicken, twist it, choke it, and make it cackle on wheels" into the kitchen. Such language gives the reader a glimpse into a world that no longer exists.

But be careful not to go overboard. Writing communicates ideas, so you don't want the meaning of the story to get buried under curious figures of speech. In the above example, it may be more important to convey the wisecracking attitude of the soda

jerk (and show how he creatively alleviated the boredom of his job) than for the reader to understand exactly what the customer ordered. However, if a pivotal plot point in your 1950's era novel occurs when the main character realizes her best friend is lying, don't have her reveal this to the reader with, "She's lighting up the tilt sign." Slang, along with other traits like clothing and hair style, should be used to add depth to a character and detail to a setting, not to tell the story. Above all, keep your audience in mind.

Having lived through the 1980's, we understand that "I am SO sure!" means just the opposite, but your readers (who weren't even born when Valley Girls hit the scene) might not get the sarcasm. Their only point of reference is the slang of today, so anything from an earlier decade needs to be defined by the surrounding dialogue, gestures or attitude of the speaker, or the reactions of other characters. A "deadly" car in the late 1970's could be awesome or a pile of junk (the word had two meanings). If your reader sees a Porsche drive up before the character nods appreciatively and drawls, "Look at that deadly load!", the dialogue will be easily understood.

## **Use Verbs Wisely (by Josephine Nobisso)**

Verbs not only show action or advance the plot, but also reveal character, or at least the mood of the character. By using the correct verb in context, you'll show the mood of the character. If you have to use an adverb with a verb, except in certain cases of adverbs of quantity or time, you're probably not using the right verb. Cross out the adverb and find a better verb that shows what the action actually looks like in your mind. Name the action the character is doing. Find the most precise verb for it. Then you'll have revealed to the reader the character, their entire action, and by inference give the reader an understanding of the character's mood. And you've avoided four things a writer should never do: analysis, generalization, summary and abstraction, which I call four weakening tendencies of writing. These four things are functions of the reader.

The most important thing for writers to present is the authentic action, the authentic scene as we see it, and let the reader come up with his or her analysis. And then the reader will feel a sense of participation. That's when the words really jump off the page and create an image in the reader's mind.

## Write a Powerful Ending

Editors say you've got 10 seconds to hook your reader, so make those opening lines count. But the final impression is also vital. A powerful ending will linger in the reader's mind long after the last page; a lackluster finish can spoil the entire experience. Here, then, are some tips for crafting endings that pack a punch:

**Fiction picture books:** The arc of a picture book plot should arrive at a natural, logical conclusion. End the action at a definitive moment, with no loose ends left hanging. The reader needs to be satisfied with the way the story ends. This happens when the main character (with whom the reader is identifying) figures out how to solve the conflict he has been struggling with during the book. Don't let an adult or other "wise" character step in and fix the problem. The conclusion cannot be implied or left open; readers shouldn't have to choose between several possible outcomes.

Some authors try to sum up the message (or theme) of the book in the last paragraph. If your story is well-written, the reader will know what the character learned without your having to blatantly spell it out. Once the action is over and the conflict resolved, the story ends. Anything beyond that point dilutes the impact of all that's gone before.

**Chapters:** Some of the best authors limit their chapters to one scene or event, starting a new chapter with the next plot point. A powerful way to end a chapter is at a climactic moment in the middle of a scene. The reader then can't close the book at the end of a chapter. The most effective chapters end in the same way they begin: with action, dialogue, or a dramatic, emotional hook that keeps the reader invested in the story.

**Novels:** Like picture books, novels must have a conclusive ending to the action. Your character faces a problem or conflict during the course of the book, and once that problem is resolved the story ends quickly. Many beginning authors add a short, final chapter that shows how life returned to normal after the story took place.

Subplots are often tied up just before or immediately following the conclusion of the main story. In young adult novels, not every subplot needs to have a neat ending. Since subplots tend to revolve around emotional, thematic issues (see sidebar), the

character might learn that life doesn't always provide easy answers. Instead, focus on how the character has changed since the beginning of the book.

**Articles:** Think of the end of an article as a conclusion, rather than simply summing up facts. The final paragraph draws information from the body of the article and connects it personally to the reader. The ending must relate to the initial premise of the piece, answering the questions posed at the beginning. The conclusion packs the final punch of the article, showing the reader why this information is important in the first place. Ending with an interesting quote or point can entice readers to further explore the topic.

**Nonfiction books:** As with articles, the end of a nonfiction book is the conclusion of all the information you have presented. However, with books you have an entire chapter to make your point. Many authors title their last chapter with a question, such as "Where Do We Go From Here?" or "What Does the Future Hold for the Amazon?" The body of your chapter will answer this question, drawing from the facts in the book and posing possible solutions. If you relate the subject to the reader's own life, she will continue to have an interest in the topic long after she finishes your book.

Endings are important. They are the final contact you'll have with your readers; your last chance to make an impression. Take time with your endings and write them carefully. A satisfying conclusion will not only make reading an enjoyable experience, but children will anxiously await your next work.

**Main plot:** The action of the book. The main plot line begins on page 1, and ends on (or just before) the last page of the book. It generally involves the character facing a conflict of some sort and resolving it. Main plots are external; they are portrayed through events happening outside the character's head. Wanting to make the soccer team, running away from home, moving to a new neighborhood, losing a pet, getting arrested for shoplifting are all action plot issues.

**Subplot:** A parallel plot that explores other issues that are related to the main plot line. Subplots may arise part way through the book, or can exist before the main plot begins. They often involve the main character's relationship with other characters, and/or other internal conflicts that affect how the character deals with the primary plot issues. Subplots would not make sense to the reader without the main plot.

**Internal conflicts:** Emotional issues the character faces during the story. While these issues color how the character approaches her plot problem, they don't provide the primary action of the story. Examples of internal conflicts are peer pressure, sibling rivalry, racism, low self-esteem, loneliness, estrangement from family members, dealing with anger, covering up a lie. Internal conflicts get your characters into trouble and can escalate the problem in the main plot.

**Theme:** The message of the book. Themes are conveyed to the reader by showing how the character has resolved some internal conflicts and changed as a person. The events of the plot help prompt this internal change.

## Write About Controversial Subjects

After the Columbine shootings, I wrote that, as writers, one thing we can do is realize that all kids deal with pressures and problems that we never faced growing up, and we should make a greater effort to address this in middle grade and young adult literature. I got many responses to my piece, a number of which said, "I agree, but I've tried unsuccessfully to sell my controversial young adult novel for two years. Do you think publishers routinely reject realistic subjects?"

Some, perhaps, are. But by and large, I feel most mainstream publishers will take a chance on a novel that deals with a touchy subject if it's well-written. And several of the more gritty, yet well-reviewed titles to have come out in the last few years are not from well-known authors, but those who have published only a few books, if any. I also believe the majority of established publishers don't worry about censorship or community book-banning, but will publish a book if they feel it says something important. So the question remains, why can't some authors get these books published?

### **\* Is the controversy gratuitous?**

Controversy is in the eye of the beholder, but subjects that have raised eyebrows in the past range from death of an important character to teenage sex/pregnancy, physical abuse, drug/alcohol use, homosexuality, and violence. But the best books aren't about the controversy; they're about how the character handles the situation. The main character may be abused by an alcoholic father, but that's not the only thing going on in his life. He may also be on the track team, or adopt a stray dog, or hold down an after-school job. The abuse certainly affects and influences his world, but it's not what the book's about. And while the abuse might define this character at the beginning of the book, the story is really about how the character grows beyond being an abused child, and finds aspects to himself that are worth saving. He might leave home, get help, or report his father to the police. For these books to be effective, the character must become empowered and find a solution to his problem. Your readers have to learn there is a way out.

If your book is about a very specific subject, and remains specific, then you'll only appeal to a small audience who can directly relate to that situation. However, if you use the topic as a springboard to more universal themes--low self-esteem, peer pressure, feeling like a failure-- then the story become timeless. You'll gain a wider audience and an editor's approval.

You also have to handle hot topics in an age-appropriate way. Books for middle grade readers often imply the events that have landed the character in his current dilemma, without much detailed or graphic description. For example, in James Stevenson's *The Unprotected Witness* (Greenwillow), a sequel to his acclaimed *The Bones in the Cliff*, 11-year- old Pete has finally found a home with a friend and her grandmother after spending a life on the run with his alcoholic father who was wanted by the law. When Pete's father is murdered and he must go to St. Louis to identify the body, we get a sense of Pete's earlier life through flashbacks. And we see the results though Pete's inability to make many friends or follow the rules at school. The reader experiences Pete's anger at his father, his turmoil over loving a man whom he also despises, without seeing all the details of the father's violent alcoholic evenings. Because this is a story of feelings and consequences, it touches any reader who has ever has a sense of not belonging.

**\* Is your character realistic?**

Your main character has to think and feel like a real child of that age. The events of the book must be seen through that character's eyes, and interpreted through that character's points of reference. You can't impose your adult interpretation on the story, nor can you make your character too innocent if her circumstances have forced her to grow up quickly. Above all, your main character must have some redeeming traits that ultimately allow him to overcome his situation, or at least point him in the right direction. Characters who are purely evil work well as antagonists, but are not sympathetic enough to be the focus of the story.

**\* Do you have a good grasp of the basics of storytelling?**

Most often, manuscripts are rejected because the writer simply didn't create a strong book. Plots are contrived, characters are one-dimensional, the dialogue sounds stiff, the ending wasn't believable. If you're telling a story with a controversial theme, you



have to work even harder at mastering the basics of good writing. The story must be so compelling that the editor can't help but say yes.

## Write Great Beginnings

When an editor opens up the envelope containing your manuscript and begins to read, you have 10 seconds to get her attention. If she's not captivated by the end of the first page (or maybe the second page if she's having a good day), it's not likely she'll continue.

If that sounds harsh, think about this: editors have more patience than your juvenile audience. So how do you guarantee that your readers will keep reading? The first sentence must be active, must pull the reader into the book. The first paragraph needs to set the stage by introducing elements of the main character, the setting and the upcoming conflict. By the end of the first page, your reader should be so involved in the story that there's no turning back.

Sound difficult? It is. Beginnings are so important that entire chapters have been devoted to them in writing how-to books. Crafting a compelling opening to your story takes practice, time and several revisions. But anyone can teach himself to write a better first sentence, first paragraph and first page by keeping one thing in mind: Begin at the beginning. Start your story at the beginning of the story, not the beginning of your character's life. Don't force your readers to wade through boring details of the character's past, lengthy descriptions of the character's family or home, or painful recitations of everything the character did since she got out of bed that morning. Ideally, your story opens with an event or a moment in your character's life that signals impending change. There are a few notable exceptions, which I'll talk about below, but in general you can't go wrong when you begin a book with action.

The younger audiences of picture books (up to age 8), easy readers (ages 5-9 reading on their own) and chapter books (ages 7-10) can't easily digest a lot of information in a short space, so you have to choose what story aspects you present in the first few paragraphs. Think about what's important to young readers of fiction—they want to know what the story's going to be about. So open your book by presenting the main character and the looming problem or conflict.

*Emma's Magic Winter* by Jean Little (Harper I Can Read) starts like this:

*Emma liked reading to herself.  
But she did not like reading out loud.*

By the third page of this easy reader (six sentences) we learn that Emma is shy and when she's called upon to read out loud in class, she can only whisper. This is a conflict young readers can certainly empathize with, and they'll want to know how Emma handles her problem. In *Little Wolf's Book of Badness* by Ian Whybrow (chapter book, Carolrhoda), we also learn the story problem in the first paragraph:

*Dear Mom and Dad,*

*Please please PLEEEEEEZ let me come home. I have been walking and walking all day, and guess how far? Not even 10 miles, I bet. I have not even reached Lonesome Lake yet. You know I hate going on adventures. So why do I have to go hundreds of miles to Uncle Bagbad's school in the middle of a dark, damp forest?*

The reader knows immediately that this is no ordinary wolf. He prefers home to damp forests, but his parents feel otherwise. We also immediately get to hear the character's voice. Middle grade readers who are drawn to fast-paced, action-packed stories also appreciate knowing the conflict early on. Here's the first sentence of *The Boy Who Only Hit Homers* by Matt Christopher (Little Brown):

*The Hooper Redbirds were having their third practice session of the spring season and Sylvester Coddmyer III, a right-hander, was batting.*

No conflict yet, but we're given the setting, the main character, and the current action. Now look at the next three sentences:

*Rick Wilson hurled in the first pitch. It looked good and Sylvester swung. Swish! He missed it by six inches.*

To any reader who's ever played Little League baseball, this signals conflict. Sometimes setting and time period are important elements of the story, and the author needs to set the stage for the reader before the action can begin. This can work with upper middle grade and young adult novels, but don't use it as an excuse to throw in a lot of description and unnecessary character details. In Richard Peck's *A Long Way from Chicago* (Dial), the small Midwestern town of the 1930's in which the book is

set becomes almost a character in itself. In order to show the contrast between this town, which the narrator visits one week a year, and Chicago, where he lives the rest of the time, the book opens with the narrator describing Chicago's "bad old days" of Al Capone and Bugs Moran. However, Peck wanted to guarantee that the reader would stick around for the action to begin, so he created a grabber of a first sentence:

*You wouldn't think we'd have to leave Chicago to see a dead body.*

That's using your 10 seconds for all it's worth.

## Write in First Person

Point of view is a vital element in the telling of your story, as important as characters and plot. The way in which you reveal your story to the reader affects how he or she perceives the events, and the emotional connection the reader will forge with your characters. Writers often choose to use the first person viewpoint, believing that it's the easiest way to develop their main character. And in some ways it is, but first person also has its limitations.

One advantage of first person is that it's intimate. Readers immediately get inside the main character's head and are privy to that character's every thought and feeling. The plot unfolds through the viewpoint character, allowing strong reader identification and empathy.

But first person has its disadvantages. The reader can only be privy to events the main character experiences directly. You can't suddenly travel through walls and depict a scene in another room, out of the character's earshot. Secondary characters are shown only as much as the viewpoint character knows them--your first person narrator doesn't know what other characters are thinking, feeling, or have done in their lives unless this information is revealed in your narrator's presence.

One of the most difficult aspects of writing in first person is that every sentence in the book has to sound like it's coming from the narrator, not the author. The author is absent from the story. Just as in dialogue, first person narration adopts the phrasing and speech patterns of the speaker. Look at this excerpt from *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* by Jack Gantos, in which the main character is a boy who's "wired" and can't keep still once his medication wears off:

*I nodded, and when she was gone I wrapped the belt and laces around my middle and gave it a good tug and began to spin and spin and slam into the lockers and I got going so good the gum I had under my tongue flew out and my Superball slipped out of my hand and went bouncing down the hall and I kept going and going like when you roll down a steep hill and before long I was bumping on the glass walls around the principal's office like a dizzy fish in a tank. Then the principal came out and pinned me against the wall and we had a little talk about my behavior goals and I*

*spent the rest of the day on her office floor sorting out all the used crayons that the kindergartners kept in big plastic tubs until I had separate piles of blue and green and red and yellow and you know the rest.*

First person allows the reader to feel how the viewpoint character's mind works.

In dialogue, only the main character's feelings can be stated. This character can interpret what others are feeling through their body language and what they say, but it's up to the reader to determine if the viewpoint character gets it right. Here's an excerpt from *Junie B. Jones and the Stupid Smelly Bus*, an early chapter book by Barbara Park.

*One of the tables in the front of the room had a red chair. "I would like to sit there, I think," I told her. But Mrs. said, "We'll have to wait and see, Junie." "B!" I said. "Call me Junie B.!" I hollered the B part real loud. So she wouldn't forget it. People are always forgetting my B. Mother rolled her eyes and looked at the ceiling. I looked up there, too. But I didn't see anything.*

First person is used less often in picture books than in any other age group. One reason is that many picture book stories require that the author show the action from several different angles. Another is that first person can prevent a picture book from appealing to a wide audience. These books are meant to be read out loud, often to large groups of kids of varying ages, and giving the story a very specific viewpoint might limit reader identification with the character. However, some picture books are very specific, personal stories, as with Cynthia Rylant's *When I Was Young in the Mountains*:

*When I was young in the mountains, Grandfather came home in the evening covered with the black dust of a coal mine. Only his lips were clean, and he used them to kiss the top of my head.*

If you're writing in first person, choose your narrator well. A character who isn't likable won't inspire much loyalty from your readers. On the other hand, one who's perfect won't be easy for kids to empathize with. And remember, this needs to be someone you want to talk like, think like, and live with for the duration of your book. Get to know your character and feel comfortable in his skin. Only then will you be ready to tell his story.



## Write in Rhyme

Children love rhyme. The rhythm of the text, the way the words bounce off the tongue can be especially appealing to young children who are mastering language and reading. There are two vehicles for verse in the children's market: poetry and rhyming stories. Both have special guidelines.

**Rhyming Stories.** Often at writers' conferences editors will say they don't like stories with rhyming text. That's not exactly true -- rhyming stories are published all the time. What these editors are really objecting to is bad rhyming text. Too many writers try to copy Dr. Seuss, the master of the rhymed story. They imitate the form of his work but not the substance. The rhyme is a vehicle to tell the story, not the other way around. It must still follow all the rules of a good picture book: a strong opening, believable characters, an interesting plot, a satisfying ending. Every word must advance the story - you can't throw in extra phrases simply to complete the rhyme. Consider the opening lines of *The Cat in the Hat*. In eight short lines Dr. Seuss established setting, mood and conflict. Few books written in prose do so much with so little.

Roy Gerrard is another author who writes engaging stories in rhyme. His text is more sophisticated and appeals to slightly older children. *Rosie and the Rustlers*, an old West adventure story, begins like this:

*Where the mountains meet the prairie, where the men are wild and hairy,  
There's a little ranch where Rosie Jones is boss.  
It's a place that's neat and cozy, and the boys employed by Rosie  
Work extremely hard, to stop her getting cross.*

Again, the opening lines tell us a lot about the setting and establish Rosie as the main character. The droll tone of the book is evident by the end of line one.



Notice that the meter differs in the above examples. It doesn't matter what meter you choose to tell your story, as long as it fits the subject and reading level.

What's more important is that the meter has some kind of pattern -- these books must work when read out loud. A good test is to have someone unfamiliar with your story read it into a tape recorder. Note where this person stumbles over lines or has to stretch words to fit the pattern. These are the places that need revision.

**Poetry.** Children's poems tell little stories or highlight moments of life. The best poems evoke strong visual images or emotions. If your poem is funny (children love humorous poetry) give it a punch line at the end that surprises the reader.

Don't try to do too much with a poem. Pick a little event from a child's day (catching the school bus in a rainstorm, taking a math test) and explore feelings involved.

Take an ordinary situation and turn it into an extraordinary episode (as Shel Silverstein did in "Jimmy Jet and His TV Set," a poem about a boy who turned into a television). For funny poems, action is key.

If your poems are quieter you can add more description, but don't get so caught up in flowery language that you lose your reader.

The best way to learn how to write good poetry is to read it. Some books to study: *Where the Sidewalk Ends* by Shel Silverstein; *Now We Are Six* by A.A. Milne; *The Random House Book of Poetry for Children* selected by Jack Prelutsky.

Writing poetry can be a great warm-up for writing prose because every word is so crucial. And remember, your poems must sound good when read aloud as well as look good on the page, so use the tape recorder test as you did for your rhymed stories.

## Write Seamless Dialogue

Writing dialogue is something that should come naturally. After all, most of us spend at least a portion of each day in conversation with other people. But creating dialogue is more than simply transcribing actual speech. It's even more complicated in children's books, because the age of the reader must also be taken into consideration.

Written dialogue is a compressed form of real speech; it's the meat of the conversation with all the fillers removed. Picture books and easy readers--books written for children ages eight and under--are told primarily through action, and the dialogue reflects this action. The characters' speech in these books must give a sense of their personalities, but also clue the reader into what's happening in the story. Just as plot has a forward direction, so must the dialogue.

In *Arthur's Loose Tooth*, an easy reader by Lillian Hoban, Arthur's dilemma is presented to the reader through a portion of a conversation with his sister:

*"Guess what we are having for dessert," said Violet. "It is your favorite treat! It is taffy apples!" "Taffy apples!" said Arthur. "I can't eat taffy apples with a loose tooth! It might get stuck in the taffy!" "Well, if it gets stuck, you can pull it out," said Violet. "I don't want to pull it out," said Arthur.*

Using simple, complete sentences necessary in an easy reader, the author has revealed the story's action through natural-sounding dialogue. As stories get longer and more complicated, the back-and-forth chatter between characters can be less linear. In real life, each person bring his or her own viewpoint into the conversation and gets something different out of the exchange. Allowing the dialogue to bounce around naturally can add humor to the scene and go a long way toward character development. However, the author still needs to be mindful of giving the reader new information that supports the plot.

In this excerpt from *Marvin Redpost: Alone in His Teacher's House*, a chapter book for ages 6-9 by Louis Sachar, Marvin is dog sitting for his third grade teacher:

*"Let me see the key," said Stuart. "Did you look in her closet?" asked Nick. "No," said Marvin. Why would he look in her closet? "How about her refrigerator?" asked Nick. "Did you at least look in her refrigerator?" "Let me see the key," Stuart said again. "How about her bathroom?" asked Nick. "I don't remember," said Marvin. "You don't remember if you saw her bathroom?" asked Nick. "Let me see the key," said Stuart.*

Dialogue is a chance for the character to speak in his own voice. But real dialogue is not exclusively something that's said out loud. The speaker is also carrying on an internal conversation at the same time. In middle grade and young adult novels, this inner dialogue of the main (viewpoint) character can also be shown to the reader. It's the author's perfect chance to allow the character to divulge deeper elements of her personality without stopping the forward movement of the plot.

Rachel Vail's *The Friendship Ring* series offers terrific examples of seventh grade dialogue. In this excerpt from *Zoe*, the first book in the series, Zoe and a classmate are talking about best friends:

*"Well," CJ said slowly. "I was best friends with Gideon Weld when we were little, but then, you know, we figured out he was a boy and I was a girl, so that ended that." "Right," I said, like obviously you couldn't be best friends with a boy. I'm just friends with anybody. Nothing of my own. Why didn't that ever bother me before? "And since fourth grade, it's been Morgan, although, sometimes, lately, I feel like she doesn't understand me," CJ whispered. "But yeah, I guess it's Morgan. Who's yours?" "I don't know." I faced away from her, toward the door, and folded my pillow over. "I don't have one."*

Strong written dialogue that's convincing and interesting is so much more than the words that come out of characters' mouths. How a character speaks--complete with pauses and sentence fragments--can show his emotional state. How a character moves while talking adds layers of meaning to the dialogue. The setting within which the conversation takes place can affect the discourse. Dialogue is intricately connected to every other element of writing, and only when it's seamlessly woven into the fabric of the story does the book become whole.

## **Write With a Light Touch**

Great fiction appears effortless to the reader. The characters and setting are so real, the story so believable, that the reader is completely unaware of the author behind the words. The smoothness of the text belies the hours of hard work and practice that went into its creation. The authors who achieve invisibility have learned the art of writing lightly; of subtly inserting so much information into the story without adding any new words that the book can't help but spring to life. Here are some tips to help you write lightly too:

### **Work hard on your opening paragraphs.**

Regardless of the age you're writing for, your first one or two paragraphs set the tone for the entire book. They introduce the main character, point of view, setting, mood, and sometimes the story conflict. The story starts in these first paragraphs-- not two or three pages down the road. Grab your reader instantly rather than boring him or her with unimportant background information.

### **Make your dialogue work for you.**

Good written dialogue contains the essence of speech, not conversation as it happens in real life. Dispense with the clutter and make your dialogue count. Dialogue should give a sense of the personality of the speaker (through word choices and speech patterns), move the story along (have your characters talk about what's happening in the book, or what they're going to do next), and contribute to the visual imagery of the story. The latter can be achieved with "stage directions"; gestures or movements by the speakers, physical reactions of the listeners, or other action that's happening during the conversation. Break up long stretches of dialogue with action or attach stage directions to the dialogue itself ("I can't leave now," she whispered as she parted the curtains and peered down the dark street). Remember, how someone speaks and what they're doing as they talk all give clues to their emotional state, thus adding layers of meaning to the spoken words.

### **Choose verbs wisely.**

Well-chosen verbs can also add meaning to a sentence. How someone moves can show what they're thinking or feeling. Just as importantly, specific verbs allow you to communicate a scene exactly to the reader. If the wind is blowing outside, your reader won't know if it's a good day to fly a kite or if a storm is approaching. However, if that wind explodes through the valley, there's no room for doubt.

### **Know your setting.**

Even if your setting doesn't play a main role in the story, it's a good idea to have details set in your own mind. What does your main character's room look like? How big a house does she live in? Does she walk to school or ride the bus? These details will find their way into your story, and add life to the book.

Only tell the reader what he or she has to know. This is important for any age of fiction, but it's most often abused in picture book manuscripts. Your story takes place during a certain time frame--an extraordinary period in your character's life. Use only those characters necessary to tell this story; introduce events, conflicts, situations that apply directly to this time frame. If a traumatic childhood incident affects your 15-year-old character's relationship with her father, then it's necessary. If her losing the spelling bee in fourth grade means nothing to her now, leave it out.

### **Write as you talk.**

You can admire and study other authors, but don't try to imitate them. The best way to achieve your unique writing style is to write as you talk. Don't search for words you'd never use in ordinary conversation. Author Stephen King said, "Any word you have to hunt for in a thesaurus is the wrong word."

Don't worry about getting too complex with your writing either. Long, complicated sentences filled with dashes and semicolons, or descriptive paragraphs full of flowery prose won't appeal to your audience. The trick, when composing your first draft, is not to think too much. Norma Fox Mazer, author of over 20 books, said she wears a hat with the brim pulled low over her eyes when writing a first draft. That way she can see her keyboard but not the computer screen, preventing her from getting "housewifey" and wanting to clean up the text. During the revision process you can choose your words more carefully, but if you find yourself stretching for a phrase or

description, ask yourself if you'd ever use that in real life. If you were telling this story out loud, how would you tell it and what words would you choose?

In the end, it all boils down to writing simply, directly, and making every word count. It doesn't always come naturally, but if you practice the above techniques your writing will also achieve a light touch.

## **Write Within Genres**

## **Avoid The "Talking Animal Trap"**

Twenty years ago "talking animal stories" were everywhere. Then, in the early 1990's, many editors decided they didn't want to see these books anymore. Of course, established authors like William Steig never stopped populating their stories with chatty mice or frogs, but beginning writers had trouble getting talking animal books past the slush pile. Now the tide has turned again, and it appears that every publisher has new picture books featuring animals with something to say.

However, you can't just plop a cute bunny in your story and expect it to sell. The number one rule in children's fiction writing will always be to base your story on endearing, believable, unique characters. I've studied talking animal books and found they fall into three basic categories:

### **Animals Who Act Human**

Everyone is familiar with stories like Marc Brown's picture books about Arthur the aardvark, or Else Holmelund Minarik's Little Bear series of easy readers. In these books the main character lives with his or her family within a society of animals that mirrors human society. They go to school, wear clothes, play with toys and have very human problems. The main character is a child just like the reader, and has childlike thoughts, feelings and concerns. The fact that they're animals makes them visually endearing to young readers, but it's easy to forget that they're not human.

Another kind of book are stories in which the characters are animals who act human, but they're not really kids. They live alone without parents. Though they're adults in the animal world, they're really kids at heart with very childlike outlooks on life. Often these books center around the friendship of two animals, such as the Frog and Toad easy readers by Arnold Lobel, and the Toot & Puddle picture books by Holly Hobbie. Part of the charm of these characters is that children can relate to creatures who are supposedly grown up.

### **Animals Who Act Mostly Human**

Another category is books in which the animals act mostly human, but retain a few elements of their true animal nature. This subtly reminds the reader that though these



animals may talk, ride bikes and visit the playground, they're still animals. Often the characters are depicted in illustrations without clothes. Children are drawn to these books because they're about talking animals, an idea they find funny, delightful, and know is something adults would never accept. Paulette Bourgeois' picture books about Franklin the turtle is one example. Though Franklin functions mainly as a kid, he sleeps in his shell and doesn't have teeth (and thus feels cheated because he'll never be visited by the tooth fairy). Jonathan London's series of very early readers shows Froggy hopping and flopping around as he tries to get dressed, and being reminded by his mother that he's supposed to sleep through the winter (because that's what frogs do). In Mem Fox's *Possum Magic*, the possums live in trees in the Australian bush and are wary of snakes, even though they dine on pumpkin scones and vegemite sandwiches.

Once you start gravitating toward reality with your talking animals, you open the door for older readers. The juxtaposition of fantasy and reality can be a compelling mix if done skillfully. Brian Jacques' *Redwall*, a young adult novel about an abbey of peaceful mice that is attacked by an army of savage rats is a prime example.

### **Animals Who Talk But Remain Animals**

The third category: animals who happen to talk, but otherwise remain true to their animal selves. Generally, if these characters interact with humans they act as any real animal would--in other words, they don't carry on conversations with people. Though the animals may (and should) face problems that children can relate to, these problems arise and are solved within the boundaries of the animal world. This scenario is perfect for middle grade readers. In E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, when Wilbur the pig learns his fate is to be sold to a butcher, it's Charlotte the spider's intelligence that helps save his life. James Howe's hilarious *Bunnicula* is the story of a dog and cat who go to great lengths to find out whether or not the family's pet rabbit is really a vampire. In each case the authors used real animals as their models, and then imagined what they might actually say if they could talk. Such careful groundwork results in characters who are believable and very real to the reader.

Of course, you'll always find variations on the above, but the most successful books tend to fall within these guidelines. Like any "rules" of writing, they are meant to provide a framework within which infinite stories can be told. And like all rules, it's only after you've mastered them can you begin to break them.

## Break Into the Educational Market

Twenty years ago, educational publishing consisted almost entirely of textbooks. Today, however, educational publishers produce books for classroom use that are practically identical to those found in stores. How can you tell the difference?

In many cases you can't. The main difference between trade and educational publishers today is that trade publishers market to bookstores, where educational publishers market to schools and libraries. Educational publishers concentrate on nonfiction though a few are venturing into the fiction arena. And books produced by educational presses are intended to be used in school instead of, or in addition to, textbooks. Therefore, they teach.

But these are not dry tomes filled with facts and dates. Educational books look and read like any nonfiction book you'd find in a store. They are entertaining as well as informative. They include art activity books, selfhelp books, biographies, books filled with science experiments and books on the environment. They approach a subject from every angle imaginable.

If your topic relates in some way to the school curriculum, you have the best chance of selling to an educational publisher. But don't limit yourself to the obvious history, science and social studies subjects. Choose topics that are of interest to children and can be used to teach more than one subject. For example, Enslow's middle grade biography series, "Outlaws and Lawmen of the Wild West", can be read in western history classes or to fulfill a biography requirement in English. *Mummies & Their Mysteries*, published by Carolrhoda, will work in either a social studies or geography class. Also think about books that might be found in a school library. Self-help books for teens fall into this category. Books on health issues, such as AIDS or substance abuse, are also in demand. Information that can be used to round out a report or supplement a textbook is the kind of thing educational publishers are looking for.

As with any other genre of publishing, knowing the market is essential. Be able to specifically identify your target audience and write your book, accordingly -- there's a big difference in reading level and comprehension between first and second grade.

Don't choose a subject that's been covered; middle grade biographies are popular but we don't need any more books about George Washington or Martin Luther King. And be careful not to fictionalize dialogue - librarians don't like it. See where the gaps are in the marketplace. Publishers are in need of a new approach to geography, books on ancient civilizations and rainforests for elementary school children, and photo essays for young children (though you have the best chance of selling the idea if you are also a photographer, or if the book can be illustrated with archival photos).

The first step is to send for their catalogs. Most educational presses publish series of books -- very few buy single titles. See the slant each publisher takes on different math, science, history, geography and social studies topics, and gear your book toward a particular house. Send for writer's guidelines. Most publishers want to see a query and book proposal (see page 3) rather than the entire manuscript because each series has very specific requirements. Pick a topic you're interested in writing about, and then find the publishers who are producing that type of book.

You can propose a series idea to a publisher if it fits in with the other kinds of series that publisher is doing. Query first, and then send a proposal with an outline and sample chapters of the first book, and a one-page synopsis for the other titles.

Educational publishers vary on their methods of payment. Many pay an advance and royalty, though some base the royalty on wholesale, rather than retail price. Some publishers are looking for writers to work on existing series for a flat fee. They simply require that a writer send a resume with writing samples and will assign specific books to writers whose experience and style fit their needs. Publishers' writer's guidelines will give you this information.

## Create a Board Book

There's a real art to creating a winning board book. These books--12-32 pages constructed of paper over board for infants and toddlers--are more than short picture books. They're designed to hold the attention of the youngest children while introducing them to the act of turning the pages, looking at the pictures and listening to text.

Board books generally fall into two categories. Concept books teach while entertaining. They may be as simple as listing the letters of the alphabet, colors or shapes, or a bit more abstract (different animal sounds, a child's morning routine of getting dressed, familiar activities done with Mom and Dad). These books reflect a child's world and reinforce basic concepts children encounter every day. They can be completely nonfiction, or fiction intended to teach. Board book stories have a very simple, straightforward plot with a beginning, middle and end. The plots feature situations familiar to a young child, but also involve characters interacting with each other. These characters might be talking animals, children or toys.

Before writing a board book text, it's important to study some successful books already on the market. Don't focus on board book versions of popular picture books; instead, choose books that were created for this format. For concept books, try Lucy Cousins' *Maisy* series (Candlewick), Helen Oxenbury's *Working, Dressing and Friends* (Little Simon), or *Daddy and Me* by Neil Ricklen (Little Simon). Good examples of board book stories are *But Not the Hippopotamus* by Sandra Boynton (Little Simon), *Oh Where, Oh Where?* by John Prater (Barron's), and *Max's Birthday* by Rosemary Wells (Dial).

When creating texts for board books, remember to keep it short. One word to one sentence per page is the average length. Write in clear, declarative sentences, but don't be afraid to use rich and interesting language. Children are acquiring language skills at this age, and if the words sound intriguing to their ears they're more likely to remember them. Rhyming texts are fine, but not necessary. The text itself should have some sort of rhythm, which can come from rhymes, lyrical language, a repetitive phrase, or sentences that are structured the same on each page.

While it's not necessary for the author to provide the pictures, most board books published today are by author/illustrators. This is especially true in concept books where there might only be a word or two of text per page. If you're doing your own illustrations, think simple, bold and bright. The characters take center stage with little or no background. Each page should feature a clear image that relates directly to the text, but also adds some interesting details the child can pick out which aren't in the words.

Finally, if you have an idea for a board book, check what's out there before you start writing. You can peruse the shelves of large bookstores, search through online stores by age and topic, or look in *Children's Books in Print* at the library. With concept books in particular, many topics (such as the alphabet, shapes, names of animals, etc.) have been done over and over. Unless you have a very unique approach or illustration style, your efforts would be better spent on another book.

## Find the Focus for Nonfiction

In Brenda Z. Guiberson's onfiction picture book, *Rain, Rain, Rain Forest*, illustrated by Steve Jenkins (Henry Holt), a single sloth moves slowly up and down his tree, encountering plants and animals along the way. Thus Guiberson cuts the vast subject of the rain forest to kid- size scale, and provides a furry guide for the journey.

Fiction has an advantage over nonfiction in that it has a built-in main character through whose eyes the reader experiences the story. But clever nonfiction authors find a focus, or viewpoint, for their subjects that makes the topic relevant and accessible to children. The younger the audience, the more specific that viewpoint needs to be.

Pamela S. Turner created a fictional narrator in her picture book *Hachiko: The True Story of a Loyal Dog*, illustrated by Yan Nascimbene (Houghton). The book tells the story behind a statue of a dog that stands at the entrance of the Shibuya train station in Tokyo. In the early 1920's, Hachiko accompanied his owner to the station each morning, and met him there after work every evening. One day the man died of a stroke at work, but the dog waited at the station each morning and evening until his own death nearly 10 years later. Turner tells this touching story in the voice of Kentaro, a fictional boy who befriends the dog and contemplates his unswerving devotion. The narrative device gives the story more immediacy than a straightforward recounting of events, and provides the dog with a child companion during his vigil.

Focus can be created with the way a subject is approached. Jean Fritz, known for making history accessible to elementary students, uses a true mystery as the framework to explore how groups of early English settlers colonized America. *The Lost Colony of Roanoke*, illustrated by Hudson Talbott (Putnam, ages 8-12), examines the colony founded under the direction of Sir Walter Raleigh in 1585. Different sections provide a context by first explaining attempts at settling the island and highlighting the English policy regarding the Native population. When harsh conditions caused the men to return to England in 1586, 15 individuals were left behind to hold the colony. The mystery begins in 1587 when a second expedition arrived and found the men gone. In the final chapter, Fritz explores various theories about Roanoke's fate. Details about day-to-day life in the colony and the customs of

the time give distinctive personalities to each of the characters in this story, and a final section-- "Clues"--shows the process of determining the fate of the missing colonists.

Place can also create a focus for your topic, especially for older readers. Caroline Arnold's *Uluru: Australia's Aboriginal Heart*, with photos by Arthur Arnold (Clarion, ages 10-14), uses Uluru, a giant sandstone monolith in Australia, as the starting point for a study of ancient and living native people, natural history and geology of the area. The connection between the Aboriginal people and their land is reinforced with stunning photographs.

Every book, fiction or nonfiction, has a viewpoint. Finding the focus that makes sense to your readers, and gives the topic a unique, interesting perspective, will make your nonfiction all the more appealing to your audience.

## Get Started Writing Graphic Novels

Graphic novels are a wildly popular fiction format today, especially with middle grade and young adult readers. With their dynamic, sequential images and stories told almost exclusively through dialogue, they're the perfect fit with our visually-oriented, fast-paced society. But what, exactly, is a graphic novel? First, let's clarify some terms. Comic books are generally short (24-32 pages) stories in magazine format. Comics most often are published as a series, with continuing storylines and new installments published monthly or quarterly. Graphic novels share the visual format of comics, but are longer stories (some over 400 pages) in bound book form. Graphic novels may be one complete book per volume, a collection of shorter stories bound together, or a continuing series. Manga is a Japanese style of graphic novel that uses fewer panels per page than Western comics with a more cinematic approach to the storytelling.

These definitions don't begin to nail down the complex graphic novel art form. If you're interested in creating graphic novels, take some time to educate yourself. Tokyopop, a US publisher of Manga, has helpful Manga tips on its web site ([www.tokyopop.com](http://www.tokyopop.com), in the submissions section); First Second Books, a graphic novel imprint of Roaring Brook Press, has a terrific catalog that includes articles from authors, illustrators, librarians and book reviewers. Order it at [www.firstsecondbooks.com](http://www.firstsecondbooks.com).

### **What types of stories work as graphic novels?**

Anything. Popular genres include fantasy, science fiction, historical, humor, contemporary, futuristic, and adventure/suspense. Graphic novels have a higher level of suspension of disbelief than traditional books, so a fantasy character could suddenly appear in a modern-day story without causing a glitch in the plot. Stories unfold immediately for the reader, with most of the text being conveyed through dialogue with short bits of narrative at the beginning of scenes. All description and character attributes are shown through the illustrations. The way characters move, their facial expressions, and what's happening around the character in each frame provide the story's subtext.



Ask any reader of graphic novels what keeps them hooked, and they'll tell you it's the unique characters and plots loaded with tension. Graphic novels require a high level of reader involvement, and yet can be quick reads, making them perfect for reluctant readers. As with any type of book, if you want to write graphic novels, you need to read several published examples first. Most libraries have middle grade and young adult graphic novels shelved in their own section, though those for younger readers tend to be mixed in with the other fiction. Many trade publishers are jumping on the trend with graphic novels like the *Bones* series by Jeff Smith (Scholastic, middle grade); the *Babymouse* series by Jennifer Holm, illustrated by Matthew Holm (Random House, middle grade); the *W.I.T.C.H.* series from Random House (middle grade); *Too Many Time Machines* by Mark Alan Stamaty (Viking, middle grade). Also check out *Comic Adventures of Boots*, Satoshi Kitamura's comic format picture book from Farrar, Straus & Giroux. And Puffin Graphics turns classic stories into graphic novels for ages 9-12. Other popular graphic novels include the *Amelia Rules!* series by Jimmy Gownley (iBooks Graphic Novels, ages 7 and up); *Go Girl!* middle grade series by Trina Robbins, illustrated by Anne Timmons (Dark Horse Books); the *Asterix* series by Albert Uderzo (ages 8 and up, Orion Books); the *Strangers in Paradise* series by Terry Moore (Abstract Studio, young adult); *The Sandman* series by Neil Gaiman (young adult, DC Comics).

### **How do you submit a graphic novel?**

Always check a publisher's web site for guidelines before submitting. Some publishers will accept text only, others require that the writer either find an illustrator to work with, or be able to provide the artwork himself. Graphic artists aren't just illustrators; they also have to be skilled pencilists, inkers, colorists and sometimes letterers. For the text, most publishers ask for a story treatment initially, which involves a 1-3 page synopsis of the story (if you're proposing a series, this synopsis has to cover the entire series arc), a brief description of the characters, and an estimate of how many pages each book will be. If asked to submit the entire manuscript, graphic novels are written in script form. You can see a sample script on the submission guidelines at [www.darkhorse.com](http://www.darkhorse.com).

Even if you don't want to write a graphic novel, try reading a few. You'll be pleasantly surprised by the complex stories and high-caliber art that has captivated today's readers.

## Get Started Writing Greeting Cards

If you can't help but write short, humorous verse, you may find your niche writing greeting cards for children. Each greeting card company has a unique look and tone to their cards. Some want verse built around a theme; others need holiday greetings. Once a card publisher is familiar with your work, and you prove you can write quickly and to specifications, you'll get steady assignments.

Again, always visit the publisher's web site and get guidelines before submitting. See "Greeting Cards, Puzzles & Games" in *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market*. Illustrators can submit samples to card companies and game producers. Other markets in the "Greeting Cards, Puzzles & Games" chapter of CWIM include publishers of coloring and activity books. Many of these products are written in-house, but use freelance illustrations. Whether writing or illustrating for a card or game company, be aware that most work on a flat fee basis, with the company retaining all rights to the material.

*Artist's & Graphic Designer's Market* (Writer's Digest Books). Complete lists of greeting card and game companies using freelance illustrators.

*You Can Write Greeting Cards* by Karen Ann Moore (Writer's Digest Books). Tips for breaking into the greeting card market.

## Get Started Writing Historical Fiction

Historical fiction is very popular with kids, especially middle grade readers. In the hands of a talented writer, the past can be as interesting and even exotic as any fantasy setting, with the added appeal of being true. Ideally, an author tackling historical fiction will do more research than necessary, uncovering a myriad of details on the events that shaped the time, as well as small facets of daily life. The challenge, then, is to choose what to use in the book, and what to leave out.

Begin with remembering that in historical fiction, the fiction is key. The story must take precedence over the history. While the characters are influenced by where and when they lived, and the events must logically fit within the time in which they occurred, your plot needs to stand on its own. Certain plot twists may be caused by true historical incidents, or an event, such as a war or natural disaster, may catapult your main character into the story. But good historical fiction relies on the author embellishing on fact and creating a compelling tale around the framework of the past.

If you think of history as adding depth and texture to your plot and characters, you'll have an easier time incorporating it into the story. The historical details shouldn't draw attention to themselves, but be a seamless part of the characters' world. Richard Peck, who has written many novels set Illinois' past (including the Newbery-winning *A Year Down Yonder*) is a good author to study for his ability to evoke the past through dialogue, clothing and character mannerisms. Look at this excerpt from his novel *Fair Weather*:

*Aunt Euterpe sighed further, and I read Lottie's mind. She'd like to get Aunty out of those black widow's weeds she wore. And if it had been left up to Lottie, she'd have stuck that awful human-hair brooch in the stove.*

*"You see," Aunt Euterpe said, "I was Mr. Fleischacker's secretary. I sat in his outer office and handwrote his letters for him. That was before the advent of the typewriter. I wouldn't know how to operate a typewriter...." She tapered off. "Well, it was honest work," Granddad declared. Aunt Euterpe turned over a hopeless hand. "Mr. Fleischacker was a widower. I was his secretary. When we wed, people talked."*

This brief exchange tells the reader volumes about the conventions in Chicago society in 1893, when a woman was considered an outcast if she married an elderly widower. The characters' names, the way Euterpe refers to her dead husband, and the reference to then-modern technology also bring the attitudes of the time to life.

Patricia Reilly Giff's historical middle grade novels are triggered by big events, such as World War II or the Polio epidemic, but the stories are more personal; how children lived their ordinary lives against the backdrop of world drama. She's especially talented at creating setting. When describing a place in the past, remember that your characters live there, so things unusual to us would be commonplace to them. See the setting through your characters' eyes and remark only on those details that would stand out to someone living there. In *Lily's Crossing*, a Newbery Honor book set in New York in 1944, Lily leaves her home in Queens to spend the summer at her grandmother's house on Rockaway Beach. Though Lily has been here often, she seems to see the house anew each June. In describing the house, she's also describing her grandmother and her anticipation of the summer:

*Up on stilts, the house hung over the water. In the living room was a deep, soft couch, a radio on legs, and, this year, the damn piano taking up the whole side wall. In back was a square little kitchen. It had so many pots and pans, and bowls, and dishes, and mixers, and mashers, that there wasn't an inch of room left on the yellow counters. Most of the stuff was dusty. Gram hated to cook.*

*The two bedrooms were separated from the kitchen by long flowered curtains. One was Gram's, the other was Poppy's.*

Lily was glad there wasn't a third bedroom. All summer she slept on the porch that was tacked on the front. She was so close to the water beneath, she could lean over in her bed and watch the silver killies zigzagging along just under the dark surface.

When deciding which historical aspects to include in your book, choose those which point out the differences between the past and today, but which also were a part of people's everyday lives. A character wincing as she squeezes into a corset will make a greater impact on the reader than describing her ball gown in detail. Small facts that add emotion and texture to a scene will be a natural extension of the plot. Don't stop the story to describe the time period in detail--if you feel the need to use every bit of your research, you'd be better suited to writing nonfiction. For historical fiction,

simply imply the past, and let the reader use her imagination to transport herself back in time.

## Get Started Writing Informational Picture Books

Informational picture books, according to Daria Donnelly in *The New York Times Book Review*, "...must strike the right balance between visual and verbal information. Each decision an artist makes about what to tell, what to show and how to do both rests on a judgment about how a grade-school-age child--old enough to resist and spurn images as infantile--sees. Success depends upon getting a young reader to linger." I'd like to broaden Donnelly's definition. To me, informational picture books use a storylike format to portray real events, incorporating narrative, dialogue, description and pacing into the text. Though some authors may invent characters or dialogue which forces their books to be classified as "fiction" instead of "nonfiction," all help convey facts about people who actually lived or places that exist in the real world. Informational picture books are geared to a slightly older audience than picture book stories--often kids up to age 10--and so the text and illustrations are more sophisticated and complex in order to appeal to readers who may have left picture book fiction behind.

People and places most naturally lend themselves to informational picture books. Because the average age of the reader is 6-10, authors must choose an aspect of their subject that appeals most to children in the early elementary grades. A person's entire life is too broad for the limited size of a picture book, but a few years from his or her childhood, or one accomplishment that began as a childhood passion and developed into lifelong work, is more appropriate. The events portrayed in the text must also incorporate action, changing scenes and vivid landscapes that inspire illustrations.

*My New York: New Anniversary Edition* by Kathy Jakobsen (Little, Brown, ages 7-12), gives the reader a child's-eye view of New York City. Becky, the consummate New York kid, goes on weekly Expeditions around the city with her family and friend Martin, introducing the reader to landmarks and lesser-known attractions. Jakobsen's bright folk art illustrations burst with vitality and details that reveal themselves over repeated viewings. Fold-out pages help capture the scope of the city, and Becky's love of New York is infectious. This would be the perfect book to accompany a child on his first trip to the Big Apple.

*The Divide* by Michael Bedard, illustrated by Emily Arnold McCully (Doubleday, ages 5-8), tells the story of one year in the childhood of author Willa Cather. When she was 9, Cather's family moved west to the open prairie of Nebraska. Readers will easily relate to Cather's sadness of leaving her familiar home and her pet dog behind. We see the prairie through Cather's eyes, at first "...a flat, empty land, bare as a strip of sheet iron." But Cather warms to the prairie as spring turns into summer and she rides her pony down dirt roads lined with sunflowers. She learns of strength from old immigrant women neighbors, discovers the precious gift of a lark's song. An Afterword explains how Cather's heart would remain on the prairie forever, its harsh beauty influencing her future novels.

Though Cather's childhood experiences are the catalyst for this book, the prairie is really the focus. The effect is twofold: Bedard's lyrical, descriptive text may prompt older readers to explore Cather's books, and McCully's rich, gold-hued illustrations will make children long to travel to the bits of prairie land still left today.

*Snowflake Bentley* by Jacqueline Briggs Martin, illustrated by Mary Azarian (Houghton Mifflin, ages 5-9) follows the life of farmer/ naturalist Wilson Bentley and his quest to photograph snowflakes. Bentley's love of nature in general and snowflakes in particular is the driving force behind the story. Bentley's humble origins, his first snowflake photo at the age of 18, his tendency to give away his photographs, and the publication of his only book at the age of 66 all capture the life of a man who prized passion over profit. Azarian's Caldecott-winning illustrations—surprisingly detailed, homey woodcuts--perfectly match the story of a simple man who revealed the grandeur of the snowflake to the world. Like the best informational picture books, *Snowflake Bentley* works on two levels. Younger children will enjoy the story of Bentley's life told through the primary text. Older readers can find more facts about Bentley's methods and his impact on science in the sidebars. The illustrations pull both elements together, making the book as a whole a warm tribute to a man who loved snow.

## Get Started Writing Mysteries

Mysteries are very popular with middle grade readers. They are generally fast-paced stories that build self-confidence by allowing the reader to solve the crime. Simple mysteries for this age group follow a clear formula where the author lays out clues for the reader in a predictable fashion, using escapes, setbacks and coincidence. The Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys books fall into this category.

As readers become adept at solving mysteries, they reach for books that require careful scrutiny to discern clues. *Goody Hall* by Natalie Babbitt and *Mystery of Drear House* by Virginia Hamilton are good examples. The following are tips to keep in mind when writing mysteries for children.

- Unlike other types of children's books, the child protagonist in a mystery does not go through major character development during the story. His or her character must be strong at the beginning of the book, and have qualities the reader will identify with or admire. However, one of the protagonist's character traits (such as having a photographic memory) can be used to solve the mystery, as long as the readers know about it.
- Another difference between mysteries and other types of fiction is that in mysteries there is little or no underlying theme to the story (such as loneliness, peer pressure, etc.). The plot drives the story, and the conflict and tension is derived from what happens to the main characters from without, rather than what's going on inside them.
- The child in the story must be as smart, or smarter, than the adults. Adults can help in certain situations in order to make the story believable, but the child must uncover the major clues and solve the case.
- The clues to the crime, as well as the crime itself, must be accessible to children in real life in order for the story to be realistic. This also helps the reader solve the mystery. A child would not know, for example, how someone could alter the brakes on a car, but he or she could probably figure out how this was done to a bicycle.



- The reader must have access to all the clues available to the protagonist. It's not fair for the author to withhold information.
- It helps if the author rehashes the entire crime and rounds up all the clues at the end of the story. Often this is done by the protagonist summarizing the crime to another character right before solving the case. This will remind readers of the clues, and give them a better chance of coming up with the solution on their own.

## Get Started Writing Picture Books

Many beginners believe writing picture books are a breeze, but it requires a lot of skill to pack a story into a few words. If writing a picture book is your dream, here are some tips to consider before you begin:

**Keep it simple.** You should be able to sum up the plot of your picture book in three sentences. Not every detail, of course, but the broad strokes. Use one sentence for the beginning (naming your main character and the problem or conflict he'll face in the story), one for the middle (describing the gist of the efforts your character makes to solve his problem), and one for the end (how he finally resolves the conflict and reaches his goal). If three sentences don't capture the essence of your plot, then it's probably too complex for a picture book.

Note: You're concentrating here on plot (the action of the story), rather than theme (the underlying message). Don't get into describing theme when you're summarizing your plot. The theme shouldn't even be an issue at this point. You want to construct the story so the character's actions, and how he changes because of those actions, implies a lesson to your readers.

**Think in pictures.** The term "picture books" says it all: the illustrations are just as important as the words. The average picture book is 32 pages long, with about four pages of front matter (title page, copyright page, etc.) So you have 28 pages of text and illustration. If you aim for 1000 words to tell your story (the average length of picture book text), that gives you about 36 words per page (some pages will have more words, some less, depending on the pacing of your story). While you don't want to obsess over precise word counts when you're writing early drafts of your manuscript, do keep in mind that every page of your book needs to inspire a different illustration. So count out 36 words from your manuscript and note how big a block of text that is on the page. That's about how many words you can devote to each illustration. After that, your characters have to do something— move around, change locations— so the illustrator will have a new picture to draw.

One way to think in pictures is to convey the character's problem, and her efforts to solve that problem, in concrete, visual terms. If your character is having trouble memorizing facts for school, that all takes place inside her head. But if she's embarrassed because she can't swim, then her attempts to learn are easily illustrated.

Note: Some illustrations will span two facing pages, called a two-page spread. In this case, you'll have about 70 words for that one illustration. But picture books are a mix of single page illustrations and two-page spreads, so keep the action moving at a good pace.

**Keep a childlike outlook.** Picture book characters can be children, adults, animals or fantasy characters. But all main characters must embody the sensibilities of a child between the ages of 4-8. This means the problem your characters face needs to be relevant and important to your target audience. The way your character tackles that problem must fit with the way a child would tackle it. Don't create an adult main character just so you can impose some adult wisdom on your readers. Grown-up characters using the emotional, illogical and sometimes messy coping strategies of children can be a very effective, and funny, storytelling technique. Above all, the character must be the one to solve the problem, using methods that are accessible to children. If readers see themselves in your main character, then they'll understand the underlying message of your story.

## Get Started Writing Plays

The market for children's plays includes regional theaters, published collections of plays used in schools, and magazines publishing plays for children to put on themselves. It's essential that you get guidelines from each market before submitting. Most theaters and publishers post guidelines on their web sites. See "Play Publishers & Producers" in the *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market* (Writer's Digest Books) for details.

In general, plays that don't require elaborate settings or technical special effects have the best chance of selling. When writing plays for children to perform, work several smaller roles into the cast for kids who don't like being in the spotlight. Don't give young actors long passages of dialogue to memorize. Consider that regional children's theater troupes might have a limited number of adult performers who need to do several roles apiece. If you're submitting a musical, you'll have to provide the score and words for songs as well as the play's script.

Plays are different from books in that the entire story is revealed through dialogue and action; therefore, every sentence of dialogue must convey information, show the personality of the speaker, and hold the audience's interest. Children get bored with static conversation--keep your characters moving around the stage, but not so much that children can't follow the story.

*Dramatists Sourcebook* (Theatre Communications Group, Inc.) Lists theaters open to submissions of children's and adult material, and information on contests and organizations.

## **Give Advice to Kids (by Mary Bowman-Kruhm and Claudine Wirths)**

Writing in a spirited style is as important as careful organization. Nonfiction in general and self-help materials in particular have changed a great deal in recent years. No longer do books on improving study skills for middle schoolers read like a short version of the didactic college equivalent. Marge Facklam, a well-known writer of science nonfiction as well as picture books, says, "The nonfiction writer is a storyteller who is sworn to tell the truth." We have found three techniques that help turn even the driest subject into a readable "story."

1. Anecdotes help the advice go down. The practice today is to use nonsexist or at least not stereotypical incidents.
2. Writing conversationally translates into readable print. For every term used in school materials, an everyday word will word. We don't ask readers to set measurable goals and objectives; we suggest they take aim at a target.
3. Instead of lecturing or sounding sage, try to convince the reader. In *I Need to Get Organized* here's what we say to a young adult about the benefits of organization: "There is a big payoff. People will stop hassling you. They won't nag you for being messy, late, or careless. Life will be a lot easier for you."

## Make Your Nonfiction More Exciting

What would make you want to read a book about human cadavers?

"Nothing" would have been my answer, until I read *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers* by Mary Roach. With chapters like "A Head is a Terrible Thing to Waste: Practicing Surgery on the Dead", and "Dead Man Driving: Human Crash Test Dummies and the Ghastly, Necessary Science of Impact Tolerance", Roach has made the subject of lifeless bodies oddly compelling and often funny. Never flippant or disrespectful, she approaches her topic with the nonscientist's sense of awe at how much a person can contribute to science after he's died. Though not my first choice for bedtime reading, I was surprised by how much I liked this book.

So how did Roach get me, who has put down more than one Stephen King novel because of the gore, to willingly read "Eat Me: Medical Cannibalism and the Case of the Human Dumpling"? In part, it's because of her everyman perspective— she's just as uninitiated as the rest of us when she walks into the morgue. When Roach attended a workshop at the University of California in which plastic surgeons practiced on cadaver heads separated from their bodies, an employee questioned her right to be there. "She has come over to outline her misgivings," Roach writes. "The seminar organizer reassures her. My end of the conversation takes place entirely in my head and consists of a single repeated line. You cut off heads. You cut off heads. You cut off heads."

So I got to thinking: If Roach can make an adult who doesn't have to read about cadavers actually enjoy the experience, couldn't children's authors use the same techniques to get kids to read nonfiction that might actually help them in school? As I looked through the bookstore, I realized some smart authors have done just that. They've taken topics that many kids might find boring or unpalatable, and made them interesting. In each case the authors embodied the everyman viewpoint— they didn't stand loftily above the reader to impart their wisdom, but rather uncovered exciting tidbits of information that they couldn't wait to share. Here are four of my favorites:

*Go Figure! A Totally Cool Book About Numbers* by Johnny Ball (ages 8-12, DK Children's Books). Teachers always say math is cool, but most kids don't buy it. In *Go Figure!*, Ball takes a different approach: he points out where math fits in to the world around us. From the humorous (without numbers, newspaper headlines might read "Football Team Scores Lots and Lots of Goals"), to the scientific (why daisies always have 34, 55 or 89 petals), to the historical (how different cultures used their bodies to count), to the magical (every phone number in the world appears in the value of pi), readers will be inspired to see math in a new light.



*It's Our World, Too!* and *We Were There, Too! Young People in US History* (both by Phillip Hoose, ages 9-12, published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux). Hoose puts regular children and teens squarely in the spotlight in these two books. Kirkus Reviews called *It's Our World, Too!* "Two books in one: first, fourteen fascinating accounts of children working for human rights, the needy, the environment, or world peace . . . Second, a handbook for young activists, with practical suggestions for planning, organizing, publicizing, and raising funds for social action projects." *We Were There, Too!* describes the lives of real children involved in every major event in US history, such as the 56 crew members under age 18 on one of Columbus' voyages to the New World; 15-year-old Joe Nuxhall who, in the absence of many major league players-turned-soldiers, pitched for the Cincinnati Reds during WWII; and 15-year-old Claudette Colvin who refused to give up her bus seat in Montgomery, AL, nine months before Rosa Parks did the same thing.

*It's Disgusting and We Ate It! True Food Facts from Around the World and Throughout History* by James Solheim, illustrated by Eric Brace (ages 5-10, Simon & Schuster). I've mentioned this book before in CBI, but it's still one of my favorite nonfiction titles. Solheim cashes in on the gross-out factor in this study of eating habits from different cultures over time. Part trivia, part cook book, part history lesson, the fast-paced text is designed to supplement science and history books or pique interest for further study. Humor abounds with subheads like "Great Rat Cooking Starts with Quality Rats" and poems such as "I Guess I Better Clean the Green Stuff Out from Behind the Sink." Brace's hip illustrations contain more jokes, and the whole book adds up to an entertaining study of what used to be called "dinner."

Remember, as an author, you're not that different from your audience. If you're excited about a topic, it's much easier to spread that enthusiasm to your audience. But don't feel you need a Ph.D. in the subject to write about it. If you approach your research as an average person who wants to uncover some unusual, intriguing information, you're likely to find a perspective that's engaging and fun. You might even get kids to pick up a book they never imagined reading.

## Polish Your Picture Book

Writing picture book fiction is quite possibly the hardest type of writing there is, and yet editors receive more picture book manuscripts than any other genre. To make your work stand out from the crowd, you need to do more than study how to devise a winning plot and create believable, unique characters. You need to polish your prose until it sparkles. Here's a checklist to help with the editing process:

- Check the pacing. Picture books are generally 32 pages long, which means you'll have about 28 pages of text and illustration. So break your text into 28 chunks and place each on a separate piece of paper. Staple the pages together to look like a book and read your story as you turn the pages. Notice the pacing and how the action unfolds. Does the story flow evenly, or are there several pages where nothing special happens? Does something occur on the righthand page or each two-page spread--a rise in action, a recurring phrase, a funny moment-- that makes the reader want to turn the page and see what happens next?
- Note the illustration potential. Since you've made your manuscript into a "book," think about what the illustrations might look like. Are there enough changing scenes to inspire a different illustration on each page, or at least every two-page spread? Is the story told with a lot of visual elements (actions and events the reader can see)? Are there long scenes of dialogue that go on for more than one book page? (Note: Making your manuscript into a dummy book and thinking about the illustrations are for your benefit only. When you submit the manuscript to a publisher, you'd type it doublespaced without identifying where the page breaks would go. You'd also refrain from discussing any illustration ideas until the editor asks for your thoughts.)
- Cut words. If you use two words to describe a character, try to find one more exact word to do the trick. Eliminate verbal clutter-- words like "big," "little," "very," "almost"-- that don't add any real meaning to the sentence, and instead choose strong, active nouns and verbs. Strike any sentences or scenes that don't directly advance the plot.

- Use concrete images. Be sure to convey the story through concrete visual images the reader can see and the illustrator can draw. Describe abstract concepts such as feelings with sensory details the character (and the reader) can smell, hear, touch, see and taste.
- Craft a satisfying ending. Does your plot have an identifiable yet surprising climax in which all the action comes together and the main character solves his or her problem? Is this climax contained within one book page? After the climax, is the story resolved (wrapped up) quickly? The resolution must feel complete and satisfying for the reader, but shouldn't be drawn out. Make it a book page or less, and your readers won't hesitate to revisit your story many times over.

## **Tell the Difference Between Easy Readers and Early Chapter Books**

Many publishers are on the lookout for writers of easy readers and early chapter books. At first glance these genres have a lot in common: both involve straightforward stories relevant to kids' everyday lives, with characters about the same age as the reader. Both convey plot through action and dialogue with very little description. But easy readers and early chapter books have some important differences.

### **Easy Readers:**

- For ages 5-8, manuscripts can range from a few words per page to about 2000 words total (books are 32-64 pages), with the longer books for the upper end of this age bracket. Easy readers are usually illustrated on every page. They're sometimes broken into chapters of one to four pages, but often have no chapter breaks.
- Most publishers of easy readers have leveled series, dividing the books into levels, or steps, depending on the age of the reader. Level 1, for example, might be for grades K-1, Level 2 for grades 1-2, etc. Each publisher formats levels differently, so study some easy reader series to understand where your manuscript might fit.
- This is the first time children are reading on their own, so sentences are short and simple. The child should be able to say the whole sentence in one breath. In the earliest easy readers, each sentence contains one complete thought. At the higher level, paragraphs are seldom more than three sentences long.
- Stories are told through a series of related actions. Everything happens out in the open, so there are no internal ruminations by the characters. The plot must grab the reader from the first line of the book and keep moving until the end.

- The text is packed with dialogue, which also serves to develop character. Read books like *Amelia Bedelia* by Peggy Parish to see how character is revealed through dialogue.
- Plots are simple, but not simplistic. Stories have a beginning, middle and satisfying ending. Conflicts have one dimension (no sub-plots) but are important and relevant to children in first and second grade. Honor kids' more sophisticated humor at this age, which is moving away from slapstick, physical comedy and toward wordplay and funny cause-and-effect situations.
- Remember that the goal of these books is to make reading fun. Use common sense when choosing words (stick with simpler words most often, using a complex word occasionally when the meaning can be derived from the sentence). Keep the action moving and the subjects light.

### **Early Chapter Books:**

- Also called "transition books," for ages 6- 9; manuscripts are 25-45 pages, books average 48-80 pages. Fewer illustrations than easy readers; might be only one black- and-white picture per chapter. Some publishers make early chapter books the highest level of their easy reader list.
- Books are broken into chapters of up to four manuscript pages each. The chapters have a beginning, middle and end, and revolve around one scene or event. Chapters tend to end with a mini cliffhanger or rise in action, with the next chapter beginning immediately on the next scene.
- Early chapter books have slightly more character development, meaning that the plot can involve emotional conflicts as well as external events. However, the story is still told primarily through action and dialogue. The reader should know the character's problem, or conflict, within the first couple of pages.
- Humor is still very important, though often stems from feelings of the main character (such as being embarrassed in front of the class). At this age readers

develop empathy with the main character, so that character's problems and feelings must be authentic and relevant to the reader.

- Sentences are slightly more complex (but still concentrate on one idea per sentence) and paragraphs are longer (averaging about four sentences each). Stories still operate on one level, without sub-plots, but the main character can grow or change significantly through the experience.

## Write a Chapter Book

Chapter books create a bridge for kids in second through fourth grades who are beyond easy readers but not yet ready for middle grade novels. Written for ages 7-10, chapter books average 10,000 words, or about 40 double-spaced manuscript pages, broken into short chapters of 3-5 pages each. Publishers are always looking for writers who can create unique fiction for this age group. Here are some tips:

- The plot rules. Though chapter books don't have to be quite as action-packed as picture books or easy readers, a fast-paced plot is still important. The story should continuously move forward, with small cliffhangers or surprises at the end of chapters. Don't slow the plot with lengthy scenes of dialogue or character introspection. Though the primary plot line should focus on concrete action that the reader can visualize (illustrations, if any, will be limited to about one per chapter), it is acceptable to have one emotionally-based sub-plot that's closely linked to the main story line. For example, if the story is about a character having to move because her father got a new job, a sub-plot could be about her worrying that her best friends will forget her.
- Don't be afraid of conflict. Conflict provides tension and complication in any type of story. Kids want to read about how characters like themselves solve interesting problems. Make your characters, especially your main character, a child in second through fourth grade, and give him or her problems, goals or conflicts that are relevant to that age group. Children this age are still concerned with their everyday lives and immediate surroundings: friends, family, school, their neighborhood. But chapter book plots can take characters away from the direct supervision of their parents, at least for a little while. A nine-year-old sleuth could identify the thief who is stealing bicycles from the school playground; an eight-year-old entrepreneur could start a dog-walking business to raise money to go to soccer camp.
- Keep it light. Humor is one of the primary factors that motivate young children to read. Chapter book readers still appreciate physical humor such as silly clothing or a clumsy teacher who trips every time she enters the classroom. But they're getting more sophisticated and appreciate humorous dialogue or

jokes that require a page or two to set up. The laughs come from who the characters are and how they react in different situations. Characters who can laugh at themselves, or who exchange zany (but not meanspirited) remarks, are also endearing.

- Keep the writing tight. Don't spend too much time on description--this stalls the action. Trim any information that isn't absolutely necessary to understanding the present action of the story. Don't let your paragraphs get longer than four or five sentences, and break run-on, complex sentences into two simpler ones. Structure your chapters so each one has a clear plot point. When that plot point is complete, move on to the next chapter. Finally, don't juggle the story between two narrators. One character should emerge as the viewpoint character for the whole story.



## Write a Memorable Picture Book

Picture books aren't read, they're performed. The very act of reading a story out loud to a child forces the reader to add inflection, dramatic pauses, and even ad-lib some commentary. Where the pages are turned can add (or detract) as much from the experience as the quality of the story itself.

Picture books are almost always 32 pages long. There is no mysterious artistic reason for this; it's simply how the printing presses work. If the book is longer, it will go up in 8-page increments, but most publishers don't care to spend this added cost on new authors. The 32 pages includes the endpages (the white or decorated pages at the beginning and end of the book), the title page, and the copyright/dedication page. So the author has an average of 26 pages to tell the story. In general, the first page of text is a righthand page, and the last page of text is on the left. Once you've written your story, it's useful to break the text into 26 sections, type each section on a separate piece of paper, and staple those pages together like a book. Now read your story as you turn the pages. Does each spread (two facing pages) encompass a different scene from those before and after? Are your characters doing something the illustrator can draw? Finally, is there a reason your readers will want to turn the page to see what comes next?

Talented picture book writers consider pacing when they're revising their texts. Here are four page-turning methods that work:

- Anticipation and surprise. In her book *Maxwell's Magic Mix-Up*, Linda Ashman devises a rollicking rhyming story of a magician who can't get anything right. While performing at a birthday party, Maxwell accidentally turns the guests one by one into animals and objects. After the first mismanaged spell, the reader anticipates that Maxwell's magic will go wrong again. The right side of each spread sets up how Maxwell tries to undo his blunders, and shows him waving his wand. The reader turns the page to find out the result of the spell, which is always something different from what Maxwell intended. When Maxwell's nephew arrives to fix the mess, the same pattern is repeated, with better results.

- Flow. In my opinion, Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* is one of the most elegant picture books ever written. He employs long, rhythmic sentences to lead the reader into the story, with tight, descriptive phrases evoking the changing illustrations. The pages break mid-sentence, so the reader is forced to turn the page to finish the thought. As the action speeds up the sentences shorten, then lengthen again to lead Max and the reader back home.

- Complete verse. Often in books written in rhyme, the pages break at the end of a verse. This is satisfying visually, as each verse should contain a distinct scene, but can be chancy if there isn't enough forward momentum to the overall story to keep the reader going. In *Food Fight!* by Carol Diggory Shields, the author has another hurdle besides the rhyme: the characters are inanimate objects. In order for the illustrator to have enough to work with, these objects (food) must really act up. The story has a simple concept: Here's what happens in your refrigerator at night. The food gets antsy, a food fight ensues, and then everything must be cleaned up before daybreak. Each spread contains one verse, but another ingenious element keeps the pages turning: the text is riddled with puns. The coffee perks, the gelatin jumps, and the chocolates kiss. The book's design also helps move the eye across the page with graphic typefaces that twist about the food, speech bubbles, and edibles with expressive faces.
- Cause and effect. Cause and effect allows the story to build naturally scene by scene, with one event leading directly to another. The payoff when the page is turned might be humorous, scary or satisfying, but it should never be predictable. It's not as action-packed as using anticipation and surprise, but it still holds the reader's interest. Many picture books use this pacing technique. A terrific example is Janet Stevens' *Tops & Bottoms*, in which a hare tricks a rich, lazy bear into letting him use the bear's land to plant several crops of vegetables. Each scene is a setup for the following page. The text focuses alternately on the bear and the hare, so the reader sees that one character's actions cause the reactions of the other. The reacting character in turn sets the next scene in motion.

## Write Biographies

Writers of biographies start out two steps ahead of fiction writers: they have a ready-made character and a story with a beginning, middle and end. But biographers face challenges particular to the genre. Here are some tips for writing strong biographies for all ages:

- Ask yourself, Why would kids care about this person's life? Presumably the person you choose to write about has done something interesting or extraordinary, but your audience may define "interesting" in different terms than you do. Kindergartners may yawn at a biography of the Alexander Fleming who discovered penicillin in 1928, but delight at *Snowflake Bentley*, a picture book biography of Wilson Bentley by Jacqueline Briggs Martin. Why? Because Bentley invented a way to photograph snowflakes.

The best subjects are people who have overcome great odds and who have many facets to their personalities. Focus on the person behind the accomplishments. Show his or her human side, flaws intact. Kids want to see that even geniuses can struggle with math, even heroes can be afraid.

- Don't invent dialogue. One of the hardest aspects of writing biographies is the limitation on creating dialogue. Everything you write must be true, so don't put words in your subject's mouth. If it's in quotation marks, make sure it's documented. This means relying on firsthand sources: personal letters, speeches, newspaper articles quoting the subject, autobiographies.
- Use the setting to provide a context for your subject's accomplishments. The time and place in which your subject lived raised certain challenges or obstacles that might not be present today. Use precise, interesting details to portray that world, but don't include information that doesn't directly relate to your subject's story.
- Give your book a dramatic structure. As with fiction, begin with a scene that draws the reader immediately into this person's life story. Let the reader get to know--and care about--the subject as a human being. Incorporate tension and

suspense into your chapters, building to the highest point in your character's life. Use sensory details to bring the story alive.

- Consider your market. Before you begin to write, think about where you might submit the finished manuscript. Many educational publishers have biography series that follow specific formats. Some religious publishers are looking for biographies of people whose faith helped guide them during difficult times. Magazines might need short biographies that tie in with upcoming themes. Send for writer's guidelines before organizing your material.
- Target your age group. How you approach your subject will depend on the age for which you're writing. (It's also useful to take a look at the public school curriculum to see how your subject might fit in with what kids are studying in school.)
  - **Picture books:** Make sure your subject has a visual element (as in *Snowflake Bentley*) or focuses on the childhood of a famous person (such as *Eleanor*, Barbara's Cooney's books about Eleanor Roosevelt's girlhood). Readers need to identify with the subject or see some relevance to their own lives.
  - **Easy readers:** Focus on a "hook" to your subject that can be explored through action, dialogue, and short text. *Abe Lincoln's Hat* by Martha Brenner (a Step 2 book from Random House's Step Into Reading series) tells how Lincoln used his trademark tall black hat during his early career. *Barry: The Bravest Saint Bernard* by Lynn Hall (a Step 4 easy reader from Random House) spotlights the life of Barry, the greatest rescue dog ever to be trained by the monks of the Saint Bernard Monastery in Switzerland, as well as the life of his trainer.
  - **Chapter books** (ages 7-10), middle grade (ages 8-12) and young adult (ages 12 and up): Formats of these books can vary widely. Some look like longer picture books illustrated with drawings or stunning photographs (such as *What's the Big Idea, Ben Franklin?* by Jean Fritz, for ages 7-10, or *Lincoln: A Photobiography* by Russell Freedman, for ages 11 and up). Others have the traditional chapter format with a few

photographs or illustrations scattered throughout. Older biographies don't have to focus primarily on the subject's childhood, but should touch on it to give a foundation for the person's later accomplishments.

- **Magazine articles:** When writing biographies for magazines, most of which are looking for articles of 500-800 words, you don't have room to explore the subject's entire life. So think "profile" rather than full-fledged biography. Highlight this person's most notable achievement and what odds he/she overcame to get there. In many cases, the person doesn't have to be famous, just someone who has done something noteworthy and who can be held up as a role model.

## Write Christian Fiction for Older Readers

Christian novels for children ages 7 and up encompass the same genres as secular fiction: contemporary, multicultural, historical, mysteries, fantasy, science fiction. The guidelines for good writing remain the same: strong characters faced with a problem that turns their everyday life in a new direction, a well-developed "middle" of the book that shows the character making progress and encountering setbacks, and a resolution that's logical, satisfying, and reveals how the character has grown or changed as a result of his journey. The main difference in Christian fiction: the character relies on faith in God to help make decisions and find direction. Sometimes a lack of faith leads to setbacks before the character finds Jesus and is set on a new path.

There appears to be two broad categories of Christian fiction: The first features wholesome kids encountering everyday struggles and situations, and learning to become better people. While the stories may only contain a minor religious element, these books would be considered "safe" choices for parents who want their kids to read fiction that's devoid of violence, profanity, sex and drugs. The second category has an overt religious component: the main character often turns to God or her church to help solve her problems, and is making a conscious attempt to live a Christian lifestyle.

In either case, the religious denomination of the main character is rarely revealed. By not stating if the character is Catholic, Methodist or Baptist, it allows more readers to relate directly to the character. Some Christian publishers are affiliated with a specific denomination and so their books must reflect certain teachings, but most are seeking books in which the characters pray to God, turn to Jesus in times of need, and refer to well-known Bible passages to help sort out a problem. They strive to exemplify broad "Christian values" that can be attributed to many different churches.

The Cul-De-Sac Kids series by Beverly Lewis (ages 7-10, Bethany House), falls into the first category of "safe" books. These stories involve a group of kids who all live on the same street and have very benign, kid-like problems. There's a simple mystery element to most of the books, but the main draw is how the author portrays the emotions of early elementary school kids interacting with each other and their

families. In *Pickle Pizza*, for example, Eric is worried that he won't have a Father's Day present for his grandpa, who's been living with Eric and his mother since his father died. Money is tight around Eric's house and every penny he makes on his paper route goes to his mother. Eric's friends offer suggestions for things Eric can make, and finally Eric stumbles on the perfect present for Grandpa. Religion comes up once in the story (when Eric overhears Grandpa praying for him), but themes of love, family, and giving from the heart are loud and clear in this short chapter book.

Another example in this category is *Forgive the River, Forgive the Sky* by Gloria Whelan (ages 8-12, Eerdmans), a literary novel that could have easily been published by a secular press. Lily Star is mourning the loss of her father and her home, which her mother was forced to sell to make ends meet. She gradually befriends the new owner of the house, a paraplegic who was injured in a plane accident. Together they learn to let go of their pain and move ahead with life. This is a novel about renewing one's spirit. The Holly's Heart series from Zondervan by Beverly Lewis (ages 9-13) falls squarely in the second, more religious, category of Christian fiction. Holly deals with things many kids her age will find familiar: the divorce of her parents, her father remarrying, first dates, a changing relationship with her mother as she grows up. She's also in her church choir and attends mass every Sunday. Holly tries to approach her problems in "a mature Christian manner" but gradually learns that her prayers are answered only when she stops being selfish and puts others first. She matures with each book in the series, and as she grows she makes God a bigger part of her life.

For young adults, The Nikki Sheridan series by Shirley Brinkerhoff (ages 11-14, Bethany House) pulls out all the stops. Sixteen-year-old Nikki gets pregnant the first time she has sex, and moves in with her grandparents to have the baby and give him up for adoption. Her parents break up, and Nikki is estranged from her mother. As Nikki turns more often to Jesus and the Bible to find direction, she learns to make better choices in her new relationship. Her mother also accepts Christ into her life and the two forge a new relationship. The books involve many elements of modern-day high school life: dating, sex, even guns in school. Nikki isn't a perfect teenager, but is intended to serve as an example of one trying to turn her life around and live as a responsible Christian.



## Write Christian Fiction for Younger Readers

The Christian market is a significant and growing segment of the children's publishing industry. Writing for Christian publishers can be as varied and rewarding as writing for secular houses, with opportunities ranging from fiction to nonfiction, picture books to novels, magazine articles to puzzles and crafts. Over the next few months we'll take a look at several categories of Christian writing, beginning this month with fiction for young children.

Picture books with Christian themes follow the same basic guidelines as their secular counterparts: spare, vivid text; active, concrete plots; lyrical, rhythmic language. Fiction for children under age four has a very simple storyline or encompasses broad concepts. The religious element is joyful, general and often nondenominational.

Take a look at an excerpt from *Clap Clap!* by Mary Claire Helldorfer, illustrated by Sandra Speidel (Viking):

*Dance--  
he gave us springy heels and toes.  
Spin,  
then stop and feel  
his earth turning beneath  
our feet.*

Though the author does allude to the Lord in the text, the main focus of the story is a child's delight in each new day, with specific examples straight from a child's experience. The illustrations playfully build on this concept. Because the message is not grounded in one Christian denomination, it was appealing to Viking, a secular publisher.

Even when a picture book has stronger religious overtones, the text must relate directly to a young child's everyday life. This keeps the book from being didactic and allows the reader to relate easily to the story. The text of *A Child's Prayer*, written and illustrated by Jeanne Titherington (Greenwillow), starts out as a boy's bedtime prayer and gradually evolves to a nighttime game with four toys representing Matthew,

Mark, Luke and John. The illustrations show how the boy makes no distinction between praying and playing; his toys symbolize God's everpresent protection (again, a basic Christian concept) in a very real way. The rhyming text has a strong read-aloud quality:

*Four corners to my bed,  
four angels overspread: One at the head,  
one at the feet,  
and two to guard me  
while I sleep.*

Picture book fiction for older children (ages 4-8) can have longer text, a structured plot, and a story that more indirectly portrays a Christian idea. Contemporary settings, myths, fables and fantasy are all used to convey the message, which is imparted through the plot and actions of the characters. For example, *You Are Special* by Max Lucado, illustrated by Sergio Martinez (Crossway Books), is the story of a village of Wemmicks (small wooden people) who spend the day sticking either gold stars (for beauty or talent) or gray dots (for chipped paint) on each other. Punchinello, who couldn't jump high or speak eloquently, always received gray dots. Then one day he visited Eli, the woodcarver who had created all the people, and discovered that Eli believed he was special. "Remember," Eli told Punchinello, "you are special because I made you. And I don't make mistakes." Without ever mentioning God, this story becomes an allegory for the belief that God cherishes each child just as they are, regardless of how the world evaluates them.

The market for easy readers with Christian themes is wide open. First, study and master the basic writing techniques of any easy reader (short, declarative sentences, lots of action and dialogue, simple storylines). Then choose one Christian principle that can be directly applied to the life of a first or second grade child (such as forgiveness, honesty, kindness or faith) and develop a storyline that illuminates this idea. One easy reader series to study is the Laura Lee books by Alice Sullivan Finlay (a Learn to Read series from Zondervan). In *Laura Lee and the Little Pine Tree*, Laura Lee is worried about many things during her family's vacation to the mountains: her father might lose his job, their cabin has no electricity or running water and they might get snowed in, an animal (maybe a bear!) keeps stealing their food. Her father tells her to have faith "as a mustard seed" and believe that good things will happen. Gradually, through the events of the plot, Laura Lee learns what this means.

## Write for Reluctant Readers

Let's face it: some kids just don't like to read. Increasingly, parents, teachers, librarians, and editors are looking for books that will appeal to reluctant readers. When I was writing *The Best Books for Kids Who (Think They) Hate to Read* (Random House), I read hundreds of children's books, old and new, that I thought would fit the bill. I discovered that there are eight qualities possessed by great books for reluctant readers, and to my surprise some of my childhood favorites didn't pass the test. If you can work at least three of the elements listed below into your book, it will have a good chance of being loved by all kids, even those to whom reading is a chore. Humor. Making kids laugh is essential to building a pleasant association with reading. But you need to understand what tickles kids' funny bones at different ages. The humor in picture books is broad and very visual. Easy readers (and some picture books for ages 6 and up) begin to introduce verbal humor: wordplay, puns, double meanings. As kids move into the chapter book arena they can handle jokes that need a setup and a payoff that's played out over several scenes. Dialogue, how characters react to each other, or the situation in which a character finds himself may be innately humorous.

- **Well-Defined Characters.** Many kids want to identify strongly with the characters in their books; for reluctant readers, this is essential. It doesn't matter what the character looks like on the outside (be it space alien, a clown or a talking frog), on the inside this character needs to embody the perspective of the reader. This means the character is dealing with issues the reader might face, or seeing the world in a childlike way. Book characters must have multidimensional personalities with strengths and weaknesses in order for the reader to care about them and want to stick with them for the entire story. In nonfiction such as biographies, authors who find an element of their subject's life that is relevant to the target audience have a better chance of reaching reluctant readers.
- **Fast-Paced Plot.** Kids who love to read don't mind a story that takes a few chapters to unfold, but reluctant readers don't have that much patience. The action needs to start in the first paragraph, and by the end of the first chapter the reader should know quite a bit about the main character and have a good

idea about the conflict or problem that character will face. Subplots are fine for chapter books and up, but too many will get in the way of the forward movement of story. Keep the pages turning.

- Concise chapters. Ideally, each chapter should contain one clear event (or one specific point in nonfiction), and have an arc of its own (a beginning, middle and end). This makes reading even one chapter a satisfying experience. Chapters that end on a high note in the action will make the reader want to see what happens next. Episodic novels (where each chapter stands alone as a short story) are also good bets for reluctant readers. Richard Peck's *A Long Way from Chicago* and Louis Sachar's *Sideways Stories from Wayside School* are two middle grade examples.
- Kid Relevance. This applies to the themes and ideas that form the basis for plots or how an author approaches a nonfiction topic. These ideas should be relevant, meaningful, and applicable to the reader's life. Instead of conveying a lesson your adult perspective tells you the reader needs to know, try using the reader's frame of reference as a starting point. Write to your audience, not at them. And remember, books can be just for fun.
- Suitable Text. Depending on the age and ability of the reader, the text needs to be challenging but not overwhelming. Strive to write your story as clearly as you can, using active sentences and concrete nouns and verbs. When writing for a broad age range of reluctant readers (8-12, for example), make the vocabulary accessible to the younger end, but the interest level appealing to kids on the older end of the spectrum.
- Unique Presentation. Reluctant readers often choose nonfiction over fiction because it speaks to their personal interests. Finding a new or unusual slant to your topic helps keep that interest alive. Humor doesn't hurt either. *It's Disgusting and We Ate It! True Food Facts from Around the World* by James Solheim appeals to middle graders' love of the gross while sneaking in some history on the side.
- Visual Appeal. Authors generally don't have much say in a book's design, but author/ illustrators might. Larger typeface, the generous use of white space,

and illustrations that elaborate upon the text all help break up the string of words and make the book less intimidating to read.

## **Write for the Bilingual Market**

A recent census reported that one in seven U.S. children speak Spanish in the home. Couple this with Spanish as a second language being taught in more and more elementary schools, and you've got a large market for bilingual children's books. Publishers are taking notice. Several publishers specializing in bilingual books now exist, and many other publishers have created bilingual imprints.

True bilingual books (those that show the entire text in both English and Spanish) tend to be picture books, as the shorter text makes it possible to include two versions in one book. For novels and longer nonfiction, publishers will do Spanish language versions of popular books, or create titles in Spanish of special interest to the Latino market, such as the *Yo Solo Biografías* (On My Own Biographies) for grades 2-4 from Lerner Books' ediciones Lerner imprint. Within the bilingual specialist publishers, the range of picture book topics varies greatly. "We do bilingual with a unique focus," said Dawn Jeffers of Raven Tree Press. "We do not produce books with a cultural focus specifically. Our universal, family oriented storylines appeal to bilingual schools, households and neighborhoods. We also find ESL classes, both adult and children, using our books." Luna Rising, the bilingual imprint of Northland Publishing, looks for stories about the contemporary bicultural experience of living in the U.S., showing diverse Hispanic characters. Children's Book Press publishes similar contemporary themes of Latino/Chicano culture, with a special emphasis on stories that encourage critical thinking about social or personal issues. And Piñata Books, the children's imprint of Arte Público Press, produces picture books and young adult novels that accurately reflect the themes, characters and customs unique to U.S. Hispanic culture.

So are there specific types of stories particularly well- suited to the Spanish/English format? "I believe that books with Latino themes work best," said Theresa Howell, editor of Rising Moon Books. "Books that Latino kids can relate to and are able to be read in both languages, shared with family members, and also shared with English speakers. They create a bond and a foundation of understanding." Jeffers added, "We do not tackle rhyme or word play. They just do not translate as naturally whether from English to Spanish or vice versa." Raven Tree Press has four formats of bilingual books: full text translation (the full story in both English and Spanish); embedded text

(an English story with Spanish words sprinkled throughout and repeated in context so the reader learns the meaning of the words); wordless picture books for young children, with bilingual notes to parents; and concept bilingual, in which one concept (such as numbers) is the only word in Spanish.

Publishers will purchase manuscripts specifically for the bilingual format, or reissue popular English-language books in Spanish or bilingual editions. "Our publishing program includes both of the above models, although we primarily publish original works in the bilingual format," said Howell. "There are so many new voices out there deserving to be heard. If one of our books has proven to be popular and also has the potential to reach a wider audience we will publish it in a bilingual edition, especially if we've received requests. We've also bought licenses to publish popular mainstream books in a bilingual format such as Richard Scarry's *Best Word Book Ever*."

English-speaking authors are not required to provide the Spanish translations. "We have found that the translation is a very market sensitive issue and is best tackled from a more objective perspective," said Jeffers. Many publishers are accepting submissions for picture books for their bilingual programs, and novels with Hispanic and Latino themes that would work as Spanish language editions. At right is a short list of bilingual publishers; check *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market* published by Writer's Digest books for more markets. Jeffers noted that it's important for authors to check publishers' websites before making any submissions, as guidelines may change, and each publisher has a specific slant on the types of books they need. "We are absolutely open to new submissions," Howell added. "Please submit!"

**A short list of publishers of bilingual children's books:**

Raven Tree Press, [www.raventreepress.com](http://www.raventreepress.com)

Luna Rising (imprint of Northland Publishing), [www.northlandbooks.com](http://www.northlandbooks.com)

Piñata Books (imprint of Arte Público Press), [www.arte.uh.edu/](http://www.arte.uh.edu/)

ediciones Lerner (imprint of Lerner Books), [www.lernerbooks.com](http://www.lernerbooks.com)

Children's Book Press, [www.childrensbookpress.org](http://www.childrensbookpress.org)



Chronicle Books, [www.chroniclebooks.com](http://www.chroniclebooks.com)

Scholastic en Español (imprint of Scholastic), [http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/tradebooks/newreleases\\_espanol.htm](http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/tradebooks/newreleases_espanol.htm)

Rayo (imprint of Harper Collins ) ,[www.harpercollins.com](http://www.harpercollins.com)

Henry Holt & Company, [www.henryholtchildrensbooks.com](http://www.henryholtchildrensbooks.com)

## Write Mysteries

Your protagonist pulls a rusty metal trunk from a dark crawl space under an abandoned house. She pries open the lid, shines her flashlight into the trunk, and finds...spiders. Hundreds of spiders.

Does our hero collect a few specimens in a plastic bag to study later? Does she brush the spiders aside to see if the trunk contains anything else? Or does she run shrieking into the night?

Mysteries depend greatly on your main character. Your detective needs certain qualities that get her into the mystery in the first place, and enable her to crack the case. How the above character reacts to those spiders must be a logical extension of her development up until this point in the story. If she's a star biology student, collecting a few spiders to study under her microscope might provide a plot twist. Brushing the spiders aside can show your readers that she's not afraid of creepy-crawlers (and this quality might help her later in the book). Conversely, if a fear of spiders is a weakness you want to plant that will come back to haunt her, send her off in hysterics.

Protagonists in mysteries need to essentially be regular kids, so your readers can more easily see themselves as amateur gumshoes. However, average kids aren't solving mysteries every day, so give your characters one or two unusual traits that make them natural detectives. Abundant curiosity is often enough for easy reader protagonists (for kids up to about 8 years old). In chapter books (short novels for ages 7- 10) and middle grade mysteries (ages 8-12), the main character might have a talent that helps him solve the case (a photographic memory, knowledge of animals or insects, mechanical abilities, etc.) Then provide a reason why this character willingly gets involved in this mystery. The crime should matter to your protagonist in some way. Maybe it's personal (his bike was stolen or someone spray-painted ugly pictures on his family's fence), or perhaps he's helping out a friend. If your main character is emotionally invested in solving the mystery, your readers will feel more connected to the story.

In picture books, easy readers and chapter books, the entire story revolves around gathering clues and solving the crime. So by developing the intricacies of your protagonist fully before you start writing you'll learn where your plot needs to go. Your detective's strengths will help her put together the clues; her weaknesses will throw obstacles in her way or lead her down the wrong path. Be sure not to make your main character too perfect--heroes who are brave, strong, intelligent and have an encyclopedic knowledge of what's needed to interpret each clue are boring. Raise the suspense by implying the protagonist might not solve the mystery in time, add humor when the detective is sidetracked by her own blunders, create empathy for a main character who is afraid to touch spiders covering a crucial clue.

Readers of all ages love red herrings that masquerade as clues. While you can certainly use this popular device (limit red herrings to one for younger readers), be sure make the real clues as available to the reader as they are to the protagonist. Readers will feel duped if you withhold information that allows them to solve the mystery.

Middle grade and young adult mysteries are also plot-driven, but contain emotionally-based subplots. The main character may be pulled into the mystery for reasons that have nothing to do with dreams of becoming a detective: a friend is kidnapped, the protagonist decides to search for a long-lost relative, or the character is accused of a crime he didn't commit. So the hero is still emotionally invested in solving the mystery, but perhaps he's less obviously equipped to be a detective than characters in younger books. The subplots involve the character discovering and nurturing talents that help him solve the crime.

It's wise to outline the mystery plot beforehand. Note where to plant clues and determine how your character will get there. Make sure the clues lead logically to the solution. Then examine your main character and decide if he has all the traits necessary to discover these clues, and some weaknesses to steer him in the wrong direction. Build in a few heart-stopping moments to show what your character's made of. When in doubt, bring on the spiders.

## Write Nonfiction for Very Young Readers, Part 1

Book and magazine publishers are feeding the natural curiosity of young children by offering more nonfiction for preschoolers and beginning readers. When writing for this audience, remember that they have little prior knowledge of the topic, so information is presented in straightforward, simple sentences. Beginning readers can read the text on their own, but it should also be understandable to younger children when read out loud. Offer definitions of unfamiliar terms within the text (The bean plant's fruit is called a pod.) The real creativity comes from framing the topic in a way that will appeal to kids under age 7. Here are some ideas:

Make it personal. Kids like reading about things that are happening in their own lives. Many nonfiction books plug into kids' daily routines while providing new and interesting information. Joanna Cole's *I'm a Big Sister* (Morrow Junior Books) is written in first person, present tense, so the reader becomes immediately involved in the story. The text embodies the excitement and privileges of being an older sibling while teaching at the same time:

*Can I hold our baby?  
I must ask Mommy first  
I am gentle with the baby  
I sing a little baby song.  
I'm a big sister--I can make our baby  
warm and cozy.*

Another approach is to equate something about the natural world with the reader's world. "Cleaning Up" from the September 2004 issue of *Your Big Backyard* begins like this: *You take baths or showers to keep clean. But some animals keep clean with a little help from their hungry friends.* The rest of the article (two more paragraphs with accompanying photos) describes how surgeonfish eat the algae off sea turtles' shells, and wrasses chew the dead skin off of puffer fish.

Involve the reader. Asking the reader questions is a time-honored device used to draw young children into the book. Planting details in the text that must be found in the pictures gives prereaders something to do while an adult reads the words. *From Tadpole to Frog* by Wendy Pfeffer (HarperTrophy Let's-Read-and-Find-Out Science,

Stage 1) describes the yearly cycle of life at Frog Pond. Throughout the book the author asks the child to look for tadpoles (When fall comes, look carefully in the water. Are any tadpoles left?) This simple technique reinforces how the tadpoles' appearance and habitat changes with each season.

Give it a face. Young children are used to reading picture books. If your nonfiction also has a main character of some sort, the format will feel familiar to your audience. Ruth Thomson's *Dinosaur's Day* (Dorling Kindersley Readers, Level 1) follows a Triceratops through his day. The first-person narration adds suspense to his encounters with other dinosaurs:

*I am busy watching all the other dinosaurs.*

*I forget to stay with my herd.*

*I can see Tyrannosaurus. He can see me.*

The ensuing encounter feels authentic because the Triceratops is describing it for the reader, yet the author is careful to never actually put dialogue into his mouth, which would cross the line into fiction.



## Write Nonfiction for Very Young Readers, Part 2

One thing that motivates a child to learn to read is the ability to get information about the world all on his own. Publishers have responded to this natural curiosity by adding more nonfiction titles to their easy reader series. As with easy-to-read fiction, nonfiction is written in simple, straightforward language with concrete nouns and verbs. The amount of text varies by publisher, but most easy reader series have up to four levels of books, the easiest being for kindergarten and early first grade (to about 1000 words spread over 48 pages), and the most advanced being chapter books for grades 2-4 (up to 64 pages, about 4000 words, broken into short chapters).

Regardless of the series, all good nonfiction for beginning readers is built on the same foundation:

- Lay the groundwork. Trade nonfiction often corresponds with what kids are learning in school, so the amount of information you present should be grade-appropriate. First graders, for example, have only a basic knowledge of well-known historical events or scientific principles. They're also still mastering fundamental reading skills, so don't burden the reader with too many obscure facts. But do make sure the information is interesting and accessible. In Joyce Milton's popular *Dinosaur Days* (a Step 2 book from Random House), the text introduces the reader to several dinosaurs and provides the conventional and phonetic spellings of their long, cumbersome names. Facts are presented with everyday references (This dinosaur was as tall as a house, longer than two buses, and as heavy as five elephants!) so the reader can easily grasp their meaning and move on.
- Tell a great story. Beginning readers need to be entertained in order to keep reading. If you present your nonfiction topic as a story with compelling characters and a plot, all the better. *Barry: The Bravest Saint Bernard* by Lynn Hall (a Random House Step 4 book) chronicles the life of the greatest rescue dog ever trained by the monks of the Saint Bernard Monastery in Switzerland. But to give this book the elements of story, the author also wrote about

Werner, a boy who lived at the monastery and grew up to train Barry and the other dogs. The result is a history lesson wrapped in the themes of friendship, bravery and unconditional love.

*Baseball's Greatest Hitters* by S.A. Kramer (also Step 4) profiles six of the greatest sluggers in baseball history by beginning each chapter with a tension-filled account of a pivotal moment in each man's career. The you-are-there quality pulls the reader immediately into the text.

- Find a slant. The format of your book can make a huge difference to a beginning reader. Books that are intended to teach information about a subject can be much more palatable if given a kid-friendly slant. *I Wonder Why I Blink and Other Questions About My Body* by Brigid Avison (Kingfisher) is written as a series of questions kids might ask (What is my funny bone? Why do I get hiccups?) The answers are short and to-the-point so as not to overwhelm the reader. Large, often humorous illustrations and informative captions break up the text and make the whole greater than any of its parts.



# **Write for Magazines**

## Analyze a Magazine for Publishing Opportunities

You've done your research and written an article on whales for middle graders. After checking the magazine listings in *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market*, you find that *Highlights for Children*, *Owl*, and *Boys' Quest* all take articles the length of yours on animals. So you should fire off your work, along with a cover letter and SASE, to all three publications, right?

Not so fast.

Just because a magazine lists "animals" as one of its broad subject topics, it doesn't mean your whale article will be appropriate. Subject matter is only one part of the equation. Each magazine has a particular writing style, editorial slant, and format it uses for fiction and nonfiction. If your work appears too generic, it could be headed for rejection. You'll have a much better chance at a sale if the editor feels your piece was written specifically with her magazine in mind.

Before you even write your article, study three or four recent back issues of several magazines for the age group you're targeting. Note the unique characteristics of each publication. Then, alter the style or slant of your work to create a tight fit. This may mean using the same research to write several different articles. You won't have to start from scratch each time, but you might alter the sentence structure, the way the information is broken up, or the length of the article to accommodate different publications. You can shortcut the process by outlining your approach for each publication and then writing query letters that explains this approach. Send several queries at once, but write one article at a time and submit exclusively if requested to do so from your queries.

Fiction is harder to write to order. The best method is to create a good draft of your story, and then study publications that are potential markets. See where your story might sell as you envision writing it. You may have to make some modifications with length or sentence structure, but try to find magazines that match the story you're writing. With fiction submissions, most magazines request the entire manuscript. But because you're not altering the story substantially to fit each submission, you can send

the finished manuscript to several publications simultaneously, unless the magazine's submission guidelines state otherwise.

Here are some things to look at when studying magazine markets:

**\* Note the Magazine's Editorial Mission**

Many magazines post a slogan or motto that sums up their editorial focus. *Highlights for Children* for example, is "Fun with a Purpose." Because the magazine covers a wide age range, from prereaders to middle graders, the content for older kids must also be appropriate for their younger siblings who might be sharing the magazine. Therefore, *Highlights* looks for fiction and nonfiction that encourages children to read, is entertaining, and also reinforces positive values.

One example of this is "Making the Most of Your Moment" by Marty Kaminsky from the magazine's September 2002 issue. It fits three of the nonfiction subjects listed in CWIM: interviews, problem solving, and sports. The focus of this middle grade piece is how to help your team and contribute to the game even if you're spending time on the bench. The author interviewed several professional athletes who play backup positions to get their advice.

Many magazines such as *Highlights* have regular columns or features that are staff-written or created by the same author every month. Unless the magazine's guidelines state these features are open to submissions, it's better to spend your time working on original material.

**\* Study Fiction Styles**

Though fiction is less structured than nonfiction, each magazine has developed a style that appeals to its distinct readership. This style is affected by the age of the target audience as well as the overall purpose of the publication. *Boys' Life*, for example, is published by the Boy Scouts of America. Though it's a general interest magazine for boys ages 8-18, the content is written with the 12-year-old reader in mind. Crisp, fast-paced fiction with lots of dialogue is key. The stories also reinforce the character building ideals of the Scouts, but as reflected in real-life situations. In the June 2002 issue, for example, "Grooved" by James M. Janik shows how a Little League pitcher

contemplates throwing a few easy pitches to his best friend to help him secure the League batting title.

*Spider*, on the other hand, is geared toward readers ages 6-9. Part of the Cricket Magazine group, known for literary writing, *Spider* has a higher percentage of fiction than other magazines for this age group. The writing on the older end of the curve isn't much easier, reading-wise, than that in *Boys' Life*, but the stories are quieter, with more description and sensory details. "The Potter's Wheel" by Alva Moore Joyner (June 2002) describes the sounds of a boy's day as he watches his father create pottery. Other selections from this issue include a haiku, the story of a girl and her father saving a beached whale, a retold Basque folk tale, and instructions for making whale origami.

#### **\* Note the Magazine's Design and Layout**

The way information is presented is an important part of each magazine's overall look. It also affects how the text is written. *National Geographic World* is a visually-oriented magazine aimed primarily at middle grade readers. Text is woven around stunning color photographs. "Something's Fishy" by Melissa Stewart (July/August 2002) is a two-page spread featuring a closeup photo of a seahorse. Three short introductory paragraphs begin like this:

A seahorse has a head like a horse, a snout like an anteater, a pouch like a kangaroo, and a tail like a monkey. But it's a fish. Its small, delicate body seems to be a curious collection of spare parts.

Compact bits of information set apart by catchy subheadings detail each of these curious parts and are placed appropriately around the photograph. Quotes from experts round out the facts.

*Chickadee*, geared to kids ages 6-9, takes a similar visual approach, but the style of writing is more fast-paced. "The Amazing Armadillo" (June 2002) begins with a two-page spread with four paragraphs of general information about armadillos, a large photograph, and basic facts across the bottom of the page with accompanying illustrations. The next two pages feature six more photos that tell a story of sorts. The text appears as captions to the photographs, depicting an armadillo's walk home and encounter with a jaguar. It's a high interest combination of action and information.

### **\* Check Theme Lists**

Many magazines use themes to dictate the topic each month. These themes are determined months ahead of time and made available to writers who request a theme list by sending a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the magazine's editorial department. It's essential that all submissions, including activities, jokes and puzzles, adhere to an upcoming theme. At first glance this may feel stifling to an author, but if you're interested in the theme's topic, there is a lot of room for creativity. The December 2001 issue of *Odyssey* magazine, for ages 10-16, had the theme of nanotechnology. Articles included "Borrowing from Biology--Nature's Nanotechnology" by Dora Lee; "Nano Docs" by Linda Bickerstaff, M.D. (about nanorobotics); "Cool or Creepy?" by Kathiann M. Kowalski (on microscopic implants); an activity by Linda Mamassian on how to build a nanotube; and a puzzle by Clifford A. Pickover about getting rats with "nanotube viruses" safely out of their nests. Rather than thinking of a magazine's format, slant and word limits as restricting your sales potential, try seeing these elements as guidelines for how you'll ultimately craft your submissions. If you honor the parameters set by each publication, you'll have a much greater chance of landing a quick sale.

Note: You can often also get a sense of a magazine's material by visiting its web site. Check *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market* for web site addresses as well as other information on each magazine's needs.

## Get Published in National Magazines With “Filler” Pieces

Many children's magazines use "filler" material each month-- short activities or poems that complement the longer articles and stories. These can be fun to write, and allow you to develop a relationship with editors that can lead to larger assignments. Be sure to study recent issues of each magazine for style and content, and also review the submission guidelines on magazines' web sites before submitting.

**Poetry.** Magazines are a good market for solid poems that don't have enough action or plot for a full-length book. The poems must be appropriate for the magazine's audience (younger children like humorous poems or those that convey a concrete visual image and can be illustrated, whereas older kids can handle more abstract concepts). Many poets get their start in magazines, and then go on to publish collections once they've established a name for themselves. Some good magazine markets for poems: *Turtle Magazine, For Preschool Kids* ([www.turtlemag.org](http://www.turtlemag.org); ages 2-5, up to 8 lines); *Calliope: Exploring World History* ([www.cobblestonepub.com](http://www.cobblestonepub.com); ages 9- 14, each issue has a theme, poems up to 100 lines); *Children's Playmate* ([www.childrensplaymatemag.org](http://www.childrensplaymatemag.org); ages 6-8, up to 25 lines); *Hopscotch* ([www.hopscotchmagazine.com](http://www.hopscotchmagazine.com); girls ages 6-12, up to 20 lines); *Spider, The Magazine for Children* ([www.cricketmag.com](http://www.cricketmag.com); ages 6- 9, up to 20 lines).

**How-to Activities.** Many magazines use crafts, recipes and activities as part of their regular content. The activities should be age-appropriate (for example, children of the magazine's target audience must be able to make recipes with minimal adult supervision), use materials found around the house or easily obtained, and fit with the magazine's monthly theme or overall focus. Write a brief introduction to the activity that provides interesting background information (the country the recipe came from, etc.), and include clear, step-by-step instructions and photographs or drawings of each step (even if you don't plan on illustrating the piece). Be sure to kid-test the activity before submitting. Markets for how-to activities include *Girls'Life*, ([www.girlslife.com](http://www.girlslife.com); ages 10-15); *Boys' Quest* ([www.boysquest.com](http://www.boysquest.com); ages 6- 13); *American Girl* ([www.americangirl.com](http://www.americangirl.com); ages 8-12); *Boys' Life* ([www.boyslife.org](http://www.boyslife.org); boys ages 8-18 in Scouting programs); *Fun for Kidz* ([www.funforkidz.com](http://www.funforkidz.com); ages 6-

13, monthly themes); *Explore* ([www.pearsoned.com.au/schools](http://www.pearsoned.com.au/schools); ages 6-12, theme-based).

**Puzzles, games, jokes.** Magazines are always looking for short filler pieces that fit with the theme. Though these fillers don't bring in a lot of money, they're quick to write and seeing your name in print can give your ego a nice boost. Study back issues of each magazine to learn the types of puzzles and games needed, as well as the tone and age group. Some markets to consider: *DynaMath* ([www.scholastic.com/dynamath](http://www.scholastic.com/dynamath); ages 8-12); *Jack and Jill* ([www.cbhi.org/magazines/jackandjill/](http://www.cbhi.org/magazines/jackandjill/); ages 7-11); **Sparkle** ([www.gemsgc.org](http://www.gemsgc.org); for girls ages 6-12, annual theme); *Nick Jr. Family Magazine* ([www.nickjr.com/magazine](http://www.nickjr.com/magazine); ages 3-8); *Winner* ([www.winnermagazine.org](http://www.winnermagazine.org); promotes healthy lifestyle for grades 4-6).

## Get Started Writing for Magazines

Many authors begin their careers by writing for children' magazines. Because of the volume of material a monthly or bimonthly periodical needs, magazines are often more open to first-time authors than book publishers. However, it's a mistake to assume that magazine editors have lower standards than their book counterparts. Magazines entertain, but they also teach, so any factual information contained in articles must be accurate and conveyed in an upbeat, appealing manner. The same writing techniques used in books apply to magazines, but because of length limitations, the writing can be even more difficult. With fiction, your story should contain only one or two primary characters, and they should be the same age as the magazine's target audience. Keep the time span of the story short, and introduce the characters and conflict within the first two paragraphs. When writing nonfiction, concentrate only on the most important or unusual facts, and approach your topic from a unique perspective that will be interesting to the magazine's readers. Here are other submission points to consider:

- Know the magazine's style and focus. Magazines have a very specific style and slant to their material. Each targets a particular age group; many are geared to only boys or only girls, others are exclusively nonfiction (this may be broken down further to categories like science, history, a sport or hobby). Some magazines have a hip, entertaining style with short articles and lots of photographs; others have longer, more literary features. Before submitting, study at least two recent issues of any magazine and read that publication's guidelines (often found on the magazine's web site, or free by mail for a self-addressed, stamped envelope). It's wise to study the magazines before you start writing, as you may want to gear your piece to two or three publications. You can always change the story to target another magazine if your first choices pass, or alter the slant of an article to appeal to a different age group.
- Adhere strictly to word length limitations. Magazines have a finite amount of space allotted to each story, article and poem. If your work goes over the limit, it will be rejected. Always print an accurate word count on the upper right corner of the first page of your manuscript.



- Child-test any crafts and activities. Test your activities with a child of the target age and avoid any potentially dangerous activities (boiling water, using knives, etc.) for younger children. The best ideas are those that use common household materials and need minimum adult supervision.
- Follow publisher's schedule for themes. Many magazines devote each issue to a predetermined theme, such as space exploration or Martin Luther King Day. Writers and illustrators can obtain a list of upcoming themes and deadlines for submissions from most magazines' web sites. Your work (including poetry, crafts and games) must fit the theme or it will be rejected. Also, most magazines work at least six months ahead for seasonal material, so a Christmas story must be submitted by June.
- Follow correct submissions procedures. The magazine's writer's guidelines will explain how to submit material and to whom it should be sent. Most periodicals want the entire manuscript for fiction, and a query letter describing your article for nonfiction. It's also a good idea to provide a bibliography of your resource materials with queries. If you have photographs to accompany the piece, mention that in the query letter. Don't submit by email unless the guidelines say it's okay to do so.
- Payment and rights. Magazines either pay on acceptance of the work or on publication, and gear their prices according to the length of the piece. The fees vary widely from receiving complimentary copies of the issue in which your work appears to getting several hundred dollars for a feature article. All payments are onetime flat fees. Magazines purchase "first rights" (meaning they are the first to publish the work, after which the author can sell the work to another magazine), "second rights" (also called "reprint rights," meaning the piece has already been published elsewhere), or "all rights" (the magazine owns the work and the author cannot sell it again to another publication). Some magazines purchase all rights, but will revert the rights back to the author upon request after a significant amount of time has passed. Occasionally magazines that hold all rights will license the work to another party (such as a textbook publisher), and send the author additional payments.

Don't try to stretch a magazine's guidelines. No matter how great a work may be, if it doesn't fit into the magazine's overall style or subject matter, it will be rejected. Save

yourself a lot of time by sending your material where it's most likely to be well received, and you could soon have some substantial publishing credits to add to your resumé.

### **Submitting to Magazines**

Check out the Magazines section of *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market* published by Writer's Digest Books for descriptions of magazines and their web site addresses. Also look in the Resources section under "Contests, Awards & Grants" for annual contests sponsored by magazines like *Highlights for Children* and *Pockets*. Even if you don't win the contest, the magazine might still buy your story and publish it.

## Get Started Writing for Religious Magazines

Religious periodicals targeted to kids make up a large portion of the market today. These range from Sunday School take-home papers to glossy, nationally-distributed magazines. Before you actually write your story or article, it's important that you research several potential publishers. Some magazines cater to the general Christian audience, others are geared to a specific faith. Sunday School papers might have a particular lesson or Bible quote that needs to be incorporated into the text. And like secular magazines, religious publications differ in the age and sometimes the gender of their audience, the tone of the writing, and whether they're open to fiction, nonfiction, or need material based on a theme.

### **Religious fiction:**

Fiction for religious magazines follows all the same rules of good writing as that for any other publication: unique characters, believable dialogue, tightly-paced plots and satisfying endings are essential. But since religious publications want fiction that also teaches, you'll need to add a lesson or moral to your story. Avoid the temptation to preach to the reader. Instead, place your characters in real-life situations and show how they solve their problems while staying true to their faith. Don't make your characters perfect (kids won't identify with them), but do have them learn and grow from their mistakes.

Humor is important, and not used enough in religious fiction. But don't show characters who are mean-spirited or who laugh at another's expense. Many religious magazines want fiction that portrays multicultural characters and nontraditional families (stepparents, foster children, etc.) Above all, speak to children who live in the modern world, not the world from your childhood, or the world you wish existed today.

### **Religious nonfiction:**

Many magazines want true stories featuring kids the age of the target audience who incorporate their faith into their daily lives. Don't fictionalize anything in these articles, including dialogue. Interviews or profiles of children or adults doing interesting things related to the religion, as well as short biographies of religious leaders past and present are also of interest. And don't overlook crafts, games, puzzles and activities with faith-based themes.

The most successful writers study several back issues of each magazine for length, tone and content before submitting their final work. They're also familiar with the teachings of the faith the magazine represents. Be sure to check if the magazine has a monthly theme list, and submit seasonal or holiday pieces at least six months in advance.

## Write a Magazine Article Step By Step

Writing articles for children's magazines can be a challenging and rewarding path to publication. But the steps an author takes in creating and selling an article are different than the process for writing fiction. Here's a checklist to help you out:

- Start with research. Once you've decided on your topic, do your research. This will show you if you have enough information for an article, and if you're able to uncover any unusual sources. Go beyond general source material and search out experts you might be able to interview, dig up old diaries or newspapers, or read publications by scientists in the field.
- Spend a day at the library reading children's magazines. Note which publications appeal to you, and which might be interested in an article on your subject. Study each magazine's writing style, tone, and layout.
- Pick a slant to your topic. You can't use everything you know in one article, and simply giving a broad overview of the subject probably won't interest a magazine. So focus on one aspect of your topic. The age group for which you want to write will help determine how you slant the article.
- Write your rough draft. This will show you if you've done enough research, and if the topic is actually appropriate for the age group you've chosen. Keep your list of potential markets in mind when organizing your information.
- Target magazines and send out query letters. Choose magazines that cater to the same age group as your article and fit your writing style. Get writer's guidelines from the magazines' web sites, or send a self-addressed, stamped envelope requesting guidelines from the publications' editorial departments.

- Polish your manuscript. While you're waiting to hear back from editors on your queries, revise and edit your article. Make the tone lively and engaging, and present information in a way that will appeal to your target audience. Tighten until the article falls within the magazines' word limits. If the piece is too long, consider lifting out some facts to be used in a sidebar.
- Send out your article to editors who request it. Send it to one magazine at a time. You may have to slightly revise the article each time to fit with each magazine's tone. The more you custom-fit each submission, the better your chance at making a sale. It's important to read several recent back issues of magazines for which you want to write. You'll find lists of publications in *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market* from Writer's Digest Books. Each magazine's entry describes the age group and topics of interest. If you can't find the magazine on a newsstand or in the library, CWIM gives instructions on how to purchase a copy directly from the publisher.

## Write an Article Query

Most magazine editors prefer authors send them a query letter rather than the entire article. This helps minimize the size of the unsolicited submissions stack towering over their desks, and allows them to quickly judge if an idea is right for their publication. Some editors will buy an article on the strength of the query alone, especially if the author is previously published. So, while you can send out queries before you actually write the piece, it's essential that you complete your research and have a good idea of the direction your article will take before committing to it in the query letter. Also, be sure you can finish the article quickly if the editor writes back and asks to see the whole piece. If you've never written a magazine article before, I suggest you do so before sending out queries, just to be sure you can deliver what you promise.

Like your article, the query letter should be lively, well-organized, and entertaining. Open with a strong sentence that sets the tone for your article--an interesting fact about your subject, a question you intend to answer, or a line of dialogue from someone you interviewed. Complete the paragraph by presenting the five basic facts about your topic: who, what, when, where and why. Sprinkle in a few statistics if you have them, and don't forget to list the projected word length.

Your second paragraph introduces the questions you intend to answer in the article, and the slant you'll take on the subject. This is your opportunity to show the editor why your article is unique. If you have unusual information or have interviewed experts, include that in this paragraph.

The third paragraph states the market for this topic. Show you've done your research and explain why your article would appeal to the magazine's readership. You should know that your particular slant on the topic hasn't been done before (search magazine databases at the library under subject headings), so tell the editor of your findings.

Your final paragraph includes any pertinent information about yourself. List previous writing credits, areas of expertise that are related to your article, writing organizations to which you belong. Anything that gives you credibility as an author should be included. If you have no relevant experience, skip this paragraph.

Some magazines request an annotated bibliography of resources used in writing the article. This can be attached on a second sheet of paper. Be sure your letter also includes your full address, phone number, and email. Submit with a self-addressed, stamped envelope for the editor's reply.

It's best to query one magazine at a time unless you are slanting the article differently for different publications. If two magazines request the complete work, send to your preferred market first. If they buy the piece, be sure you retain the appropriate rights to write about the same subject for a different market before submitting a new article elsewhere.



## **Write Nonfiction Magazine Articles**

Nonfiction can be profitable because you can use the same research on several pieces. Find a topic you love, gather your information, and then craft several articles for different markets. Remember that children are most interested in the "how" and "why" of a subject, especially if you present it in a humorous or unique way.

### **Longer how-to articles:**

These differ from straight activities because they require more of an introduction than, "Have you ever wanted to make paper dolls? Here's how!" Many magazines have theme lists for each issue, and want activities that also present information related to the theme. That same paper doll activity might be prefaced by several paragraphs on the history of paper dolls in the U.S., or focus on paper dolls manufactured during a particular decade. The "how to" element would follow, with clear, step-by-step instructions children can complete on their own, or with minimal adult supervision.

How-to articles for older readers might involve self-help topics, or tips for improving relationships, getting organized, or landing a summer job. Break these more abstract topics into several steps and use catchy subheads to keep the article entertaining.

### **Interviews and profiles:**

You don't have to look far to find subjects to profile for magazines. Many publications want articles about kids doing interesting or unusual things. Research potential markets before finding your subjects, as each magazine's audience and focus differs. Interviews with adults in your community who have unusual jobs or ordinary people who are making a difference in the world are also good subjects. Center your interview questions around areas the magazine's target audience would find most fascinating.

### **Biographies:**

Many magazines need short biographies of adults whose lives are connected to themes for upcoming issues. When writing a magazine biography, focus on a small aspect of the person's life, such as a pivotal childhood experience that inspired him to take a certain path in adulthood, or the one or two accomplishments for which that person is best known. Or, for famous subjects, highlight some obscure achievements. Many magazines love to receive biographies of unknown people who had an impact on a big moment in history.

### **Feature articles:**

If you enjoy research and are passionate about a topic, wait until you uncover some new, interesting, or tantalizing facts that would fascinate kids. Then study several recent issues of magazines for different age groups to determine which publications might be interested in a feature article on your subject. Many nonfiction editors prefer to see a query letter describing the article, the age group, and the slant you're planning to take on the topic before you write the entire piece. Note the format of each publication you're querying so you can mention any necessary sidebars, graphs, timelines or photos you'd need to provide.

### **Reviews:**

Some magazines have regular departments that take freelance reviews of children's software, video games, books, or other products. Check the magazine's guidelines before submitting any reviews, as sometimes they're staff-written or written by kids. Also note if the reviews are targeted to the children reading the magazine, or to their parents.

Regardless of the type of magazine nonfiction you write, your best chance for publication is if you custom-fit each submission. Study each magazine's style, note if the articles tend to be light and humorous or have a more scholarly tone. Design your submission to look as if it belongs in the magazine by including sidebar material or photographs, if needed. Give the editor something she can use, but written in a way she's never seen before.

## Write Self-Help Articles for Kids

Unlike their parents, when kids look for advice they don't usually turn to Oprah. Most kids get everyday, self-improvement type information from their magazines. If you're brimming with ideas for articles on how to teach kids to help themselves or develop new skills, here are some tips:

- Let the audience and age group guide your topic. Each magazine has a different focus--some are health-related, others might concentrate on the activities of a specific organization. Make sure your advice fits with the magazine's editorial slant. Also, pay attention to the age of the targeted audience. An article on why spreading gossip is a bad thing is relevant to teen and preteen readers. A piece about being a responsible pet owner could appeal to any age group, depending on how it's written. So check out potential markets before you sit down to write.
- Don't preach. You're giving advice, so it's tempting to lecture or preach to the reader. Don't. You'll lose your audience faster than you can say Dr. Phil. Instead, acknowledge what your readers face in their lives and let them know you're on their side. "The hard truth is, sharing DNA with your siblings is no guarantee that you're always going to like each other," is a better approach to an article about resolving sibling rivalry than, "Brothers and sisters are supposed to love each other. Fighting just drives your parents crazy. Let it go!"
- Don't try to sound "hip." Use a normal conversational tone when writing advice for kids, as if you're speaking to a group of them in person. Don't throw in slang or pop references unless they routinely roll off your tongue. On the other hand, opening your article with an anecdote, unusual statement, or humorous question can be an attention-grabber. Just make sure those anecdotes are about other kids, and don't begin with, "When I was your age...."

- Talk directly to the reader. This is one of those rare situations where the second person point of view works. Address the readers directly (The first time you walk into a new school, you may feel nervous. You might even think everyone's looking at you. Don't worry--all new students feel this way.) Put the readers right into the article so they can see how your advice can be useful in their lives.
- When possible, combine the advice with a "how-to" approach. After explaining to the readers how to make an improvement in their lives, show them. Either as part of the article or as a separate sidebar, give how-to, step-by-step instructions that can be seen at a glance. For example, if you're writing a piece for teens on being financially responsible, you can include a how-to sidebar on finding a summer job, complete with tips for filling out applications and doing interviews.

Use other self-help and advice articles in your targeted magazine markets as templates for how you should write your article. Pay attention to style, length, and whether the information is presented in small bites or large chunks. Then unleash your best advice, and one day you too may be on Oprah!

**Submit Your Manuscript & Get It  
Published**

## Analyze a Publisher's Catalog

Before submitting your work, it's essential that you study publishers' lists to find the best fit for your manuscript. Your first stop is *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market* published by Writer's Digest Books. Note which publishers do the type of book you've written, and are also accepting submissions from new writers. Then send for a current catalog.

Let's look at the picture books from two hypothetical publishers:

Publisher A:

- Total picture books: 26.
- Picture books by type: 8 talking animal stories; 4 concept books; 2 realistic stories; 2 humorous stories; 2 fantasy; 1 holiday book (Easter); 3 nonfiction (2 animal/nature, 1 religion); 4 poetry collections.
- Age range of books: 6 for ages 2-5, 12 for ages 4-7, 6 for ages 6-10.
- Types of authors: Established authors (two or more books published)–5; famous authors (significant name recognition/ awards)–11; reissues of classic books–5 (3 poetry collections); new authors–5.
- Percent of list from new authors: just over 19%.

Publisher B:

- Total picture books: 14.
- By type: 4 talking animals; 1 concept book; 2 realistic stories; 3 humorous stories; 4 nonfiction (history, biography).
- Age range of books: 3 for ages 3-6; 11 for ages 4-8 or 4-9.
- Types of authors: Established authors–7; famous authors–3; new authors–4.
- Percent of list from new authors: 28.5%

Suppose you have a picture book featuring talking animal characters. Even though Publisher A has fewer new authors, it publishes a greater percentage of talking animal

stories. And you really want Publisher A to do your book. Should you submit? First, look at the authors in Publisher A's stable. Over half are famous or authors of classic books (which means instant sales for the reissued editions). Plus, after studying the bios of the authors in the catalog, you discover that 3 out of the 5 new authors are either celebrities or well-known illustrators writing their first books. Clearly, this publisher prefers authors with some name-recognition. Does this mean you shouldn't submit here?

Not necessarily, but move it down your list. Publisher B has a higher percentage of new authors (no celebrities and only one a known illustrator), a good number of animal stories, and a greater number of humorous books. Since your talking animal story has ironic humor that will appeal to older picture book readers (who make up the majority of this publisher's audience), Publisher B seems a good fit.

Other things we've learned: Publisher B favors books about history and real people, as seen by the nonfiction titles and the fact that the realistic fiction books are both based on public figures (you'll learn this by reading the plot descriptions). So your picture book fiction incorporating real events set at the turn of the century might appeal to these editors.

On the other hand, Publisher A has done a holiday book and a religious book, whereas Publisher B has neither. So a religious picture book might fit best with Publisher A, unless the book is a biography of a religious leader.

Clearly, analyzing publishers' catalogs isn't an exact science, but it can help increase your chances of finding a good match with an editor down the road.

## **Avoid Looking Like a Beginner**

I often talk about the "rules" of writing for kids, citing proper page lengths and story types for different age groups. A better term would probably be "guidelines"; these rules exist only to tell you what, in general, editors like to see in the manuscripts sent to them. And, of course, for every rule there are numerous exceptions. But while we'd all like to think our book is strong enough to override the guidelines, this is usually not the case. Here are some rules that shouldn't be broken until you really know what you're doing:

### **1. Don't Write Picture Books in Rhyme**

Yes, you've seen them in the stores and kids like them. But children also like picture books that aren't written in rhyme. It takes a great deal of skill and hard work to craft an original story, complete with unique characters, in about 1000 words. It takes another skill entirely to tell that story in rhyme. If you've got it, great. But don't assume that because your story is aimed at young children it has to rhyme. Always try to write it in prose first. Once you've got the story on paper, decide if the rhyming format will add to the text. If the answer is yes, make sure it's strong rhyme: it has a consistent meter, uses no clichés or extra words, and has a rhythm that is easy to read aloud. Write Within Designated Word Lengths

No editor is going to turn down a terrific book just because the text length falls outside the average guidelines. If your young adult novel is complete in 100 pages, there's no sense padding the manuscript simply because most YAs are longer. But length guidelines are there for a reason- publishers have determined about how much text kids of different ages can read, and so it behooves you to try to stay as close to those guidelines as possible. And if you've ever tried to get a group of 4-year-olds to sit still for a 2000-word picture book, you'll understand why editors are leaning toward shorter texts in the youngest age brackets. When submitting to magazines, it's absolutely essential that you stick to the requested word limits because articles must fit within a finite amount of space on the page. Too long, or too short, can mean instant rejection.

### **2. Don't Provide Testimonials in Queries**



It's nice to have lots of neighborhood kids read your manuscript and give you positive feedback, but your potential editor doesn't need to hear about it. Frankly, editors don't give much credence to testimonials from readers who may be family or friends of the author. Also, don't clutter up the query letter with ideas for why children need your book or what they'll learn from it. This is up to the editor to decide. (One exception: You've written a nonfiction book and can show that there aren't any other books in print that cover the same subject).

Keep your query letter tight, brief, and to the point. Provide an intriguing plot synopsis or nonfiction outline, relevant information about yourself, and enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Sell your book, not your reasons for writing it.

### **3. Don't Write a Series Before Selling the First Book**

I've critiqued many manuscripts from authors who say, "I've got six more books written with these characters. Should I mention that to the editor when I submit my manuscript?" My answer is always no. Unless an editor is specifically looking for new series proposals, and the books were written from the start to form a series, this is a bad idea. Realize that series are created as a group of books that are bound together by some sort of hook; in fiction, it might be a club the main characters form, a neighborhood they all live in, or a cause they champion. In nonfiction, it's a topic (natural sciences, biographies) and an age group. Rarely do you see picture book fiction series. What does happen is a character may become very popular with readers and the author is asked to write another book featuring the same cast. These fiction "series" actually grow slowly one book at a time.

So, unless you've conceived your books as a traditional series and are able to send a thought-out series proposal to the editor, stick to selling one book. When an editor sees you have numerous manuscripts featuring the same characters and similar plots, she may feel that you've spent too much writing new material and not enough time revising what you've already got. And remember, each book--series or not--must stand on its own. It needs a strong beginning, well-developed middle, and satisfying end. No fair leaving the ending unfinished with the intention of continuing the story in the next book.

## Avoid Rejection Letters

At a recent SCBWI conference in Denver, Melanie Cecka, Senior Editor for Viking Children's Books, tried to answer that perennial question, "What are editors looking for?" Her answer--and this is a real kicker--is that because publishers are cutting back on the size of their lists, editors are looking for reasons not to publish your book.

Does this mean that editors are planning to hate every manuscript that crosses their desks? Certainly not. Every time an editor opens an unsolicited submission she's hoping she'll find a new, undiscovered talent. But because the volume of books being published has dropped in recent years, each book carries more weight for the publisher. And fiction by new authors in particular must be of the highest quality to compete with the novelizations of movies and television shows crowding the shelves, and picture books based on familiar, popular licensed characters. When you're revising your work and sending it out, try to think like an editor. As you attend conferences or read books on publishing, compile a list of "don'ts" that will get your manuscript routed immediately to the rejection pile.

Here are some to get you started:

- Unprofessional presentation. A cover or query letter that shows the writer clearly doesn't understand the different age categories of children's books (such as saying you've written a 3000 word picture book for ages 6-11), tells the editor she doesn't have to read any further. By simply studying recently published books written for the same age group as your work, you can learn many of the basic "rules." Sloppy queries, those that explain the writer's motivation for creating the work ("to teach children about \_\_\_\_\_") instead of summarizing the work itself, or submitting five manuscripts at once are all turnoffs to an editor. For help writing query and cover letters, see the resource in the sidebar.
- A weak opening. The first paragraph of your book needs to grab the editor and insist that she keep reading. The opening page should introduce your main character, establish the setting and time period, push the action forward and clue the reader into the "hook" of the story (what makes your book different).

To learn how to craft strong openings, ask your librarian for award lists (especially those awards voted by children), and read only the first paragraph of the winners. Note how much information you got from this small amount of text. Also note whether you wanted to keep reading, and why.

- Lack of vision. Cecka said she looks for stories that make her ask, "What if?" In other words, she wants to identify so strongly with the characters that she'll wonder what it would be like to live their lives. Fully developed characters coupled with a unique way of approaching an idea results in a book with vision. The author does more than tell a story--he transports the reader to another place and asks the reader to look at the world in a new way. It's often clear to an editor from the query letter whether the author has vision, or has written the kind of book children "should" like or "need" to read.

In the end, what distinguishes a manuscript from the hundreds of others in the slush pile is the writer's passion. If the author positions himself as bestowing a story upon children, or imparting wisdom from a distant, adult perspective, the book will fail. However, if the author is so enthralled with the characters and caught up in the plot that the experience is shared with the reader, the manuscript will shine.

## **Break the Rules of Submitting a Manuscript**

The "rules" of manuscript submission exist for a reason: if authors act professionally and follow standard procedures, editors are free to evaluate the merits of the writing. But some rules can be bent if the author has a very good reason for doing so. Below are a few of those flexible rules:

### You can include illustration suggestions with your manuscript if...

...something needs to happen in the pictures for the plot of the book to make sense, but this action is not mentioned in the text. In this case, add a brief explanation of the illustration in your cover letter. If the picture comes at the end of the book (such as the punchline to a joke set up on the previous page), you may add a one-sentence illustration note on the manuscript itself.

### You may send illustrations with the manuscript if...

...you are a professional artist. This means you have art experience and/or training, and your illustrations are of a quality that can compete with artwork in other published picture books. You can also include illustration samples from someone else (an illustrator) if you have written the text AND the publisher specifically requests in its guidelines that they want authors to suggest illustrators for their books. Otherwise, leave the selection of the illustrator up to the publisher.

### You can go over the standard word count if...

...the story requires more length than is standard. This isn't a license to get wordy. Some books have complicated plots that can't be resolved in the average page count (the Harry Potter books are popular examples). However, the shorter the book, the more important it is that authors adhere to accepted limits. Picture books will never be 3500 words long (1000 words is average). And always pay close attention to magazine word requirements, which have no wiggle room.

You can pitch your general idea to an editor over the phone, or via email, if...

...you already have a close working relationship. If an editor is familiar with your work and has published your books, then she will be open to hearing new ideas as you're developing them. But if you're not yet published, don't try this shortcut. Write the book (fiction) or the book proposal (nonfiction) and follow standard submission procedures.

You can outline your ideas for marketing your book in your initial submission if...

...you've written a nonfiction book or fiction with a very specific, niche audience. Even then, back up your marketing suggestions with facts, statistics, specific plans for how and where the book could be sold, and mention of personal/professional experience that ties in with the topic of the book. For general fiction, don't talk marketing until you have a book contract.

## Check Out a Publisher Before Signing a Contract

It seems every day you can open up a trade journal and read about a new publisher entering the children's book scene. While most of these publishers are well-funded and have some sort of background in the industry, a few may be bad risks for an author or illustrator.

Here are some ways you can check out a publisher before signing a contract:

- Talk to the person who will be editing your book. Is your editor enthusiastic about your work, and does he or she have specific, in-depth ideas about needed changes in the text? Very few manuscripts arrive at a publisher's office in perfect shape. If your editor has no changes in mind, question him or her about areas in the manuscript you may feel are weak. See if the editor has constructive ideas for revisions.
- If you're an illustrator, speak with the art director. Find out how much guidance you will be given while illustrating the book, or if you will be working with no direction. Are the editor and art director accessible? Do they return your phone calls? Once an offer has been made on a book, they should call you back within a reasonable time period. Look at the publisher's catalog. Is the catalog designed in a professional manner? Not all catalogs have to be glossy, four-color publications, but they should include clear pictures of each book cover, with information about the book and how to order it. Make sure the publisher's turnaround time for orders is four weeks or less.
- Ask about the publisher's distribution system. Are the publisher's books distributed by a well-known wholesaler or distributor, or is the publisher relying mainly on direct mail to sell books? Many small presses sell most of their books through mail order, and do quite well. It's important, however, that the publisher has good mailing lists that will be relevant to your book. (General fiction doesn't do as well with direct mail as nonfiction, for which a very specific market can be targeted.)

- Go to a large bookstore and ask to order one of the publisher's books. If that bookstore can't find either the publisher or the distributor in its computer, it will have trouble ordering your title when it's published.
- Look at other books the publisher has produced. Are the quality of the paper and binding good? Do you like the design? Do you feel the book is priced comparably to other similar books on the market?
- "Google" the publisher's name to see what's been posted online about them. Visit key writer's message boards and search through the back messages.
- Ask the publisher how your book will be marketed. Does the publisher have a solid marketing plan, or will you be relied upon to do most of the marketing yourself?
- See if the publisher is listed in Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market. This won't apply if the publisher is brand new, but if the company is at least a year old it could be listed in CWIM, or similar trade directories. CWIM checks out publishers before listing them, and if the directory receives three or more complaints about a company, the listing is removed the following year. Was the publisher listed last year but not in the current edition?
- Read the contract carefully. Make sure it contains a projected publication date, the author or illustrator retains copyright to the work, and that money is accounted for properly. Many smaller presses don't pay advances, but they give higher royalties or pay more often (every month or every 60 days). Be sure you don't have to pay the publisher any money to produce your book.

It's not possible to follow all these steps, of course, if the publisher is new and hasn't produced its first list. In that case you could ask to contact some other authors or illustrators the publisher is working with, and get their impressions of the company. By and large, most new publishers are legitimate, sincere and dedicated professionals, and are not a bad risk for the author or illustrator. These people will not object to your researching the company. Those who do should be approached with caution.



## Determine If Your Idea Is Any Good

Imagine this conversation between Dr. Seuss and his editor:

*Dr. Seuss: I've got an idea for a book about a cat.*

*Editor: What kind of cat?*

*Dr. Seuss: A cat in a hat.*

*Editor: What kind of hat?*

*Dr. Seuss: I don't know—a hat. Hats are funny. Kids love hats. Puss in Boots is a classic. I'm just moving the clothing up the body.*

*Editor: Let me think about it.*

A cat in a hat. As ideas go, it's not terrible, but then again there's not much to go on. What if Dr. Seuss had stopped developing his idea and started writing at that moment? We'd still have the cold, boring, wet day when Mother is out. We may have the Cat in the Hat who pops in to visit and stir things up a bit. But chances are, the narrator, his sister Sally and the Cat would spend much of the day chatting and drinking milk. Generations of children would never have learned that Thing One and Thing Two are mischievous but messy, you can have lots of good fun with a game called "Up-up-up with a fish," and you'll avoid trouble if you clean up after yourself. Looking back on all the books I've read, I'd have to say very few ideas could be classified as "bad." What separates the good ideas from the mediocre is their execution. Anyone can have an idea. It takes talent and ingenuity to run with that idea and end up somewhere great.

Though I believe there are very few bad ideas, I admit I've read my share of bad executions. In virtually every case, the writer didn't let the idea germinate long enough to grow into something original and interesting. Often the first ideas are too obvious to make a compelling, surprising book. Authors get lazy (Kids love any form of talking animal, so I don't have to work too hard on the characters.), or full of themselves (Children should want to read this story because it's good for them.), or have completely lost their edge (What's better than a snuggly story about hot chocolate, fuzzy kittens and bedtime blankies?) This happens when writers are afraid to bring elements of themselves to their work. They think that because they're writing

for kids they have to keep themselves in check—they always have to be on their best behavior.

So how can you judge if your ideas are any good? Try asking yourself the following questions:

- Why would kids care? It's hard to objectively see our own ideas, but if we're forced to justify their existence, we might get some perspective. First, sum up your core idea in one or two sentences. Then, list all the reasons a child of your target audience would want to read a book or magazine piece centered around this concept. Are the reasons kid-driven (it's funny/relevant to the child's life/entertaining/shows a new way of looking at the world that's meaningful to this age), or author-driven (it teaches a valuable lesson/is something that happened to the author as a child/is cute, charming or precious/shows kids what life is like from their parents' viewpoint)? Kids should come willingly to your books, not be dragged kicking and screaming.
- Does the idea need developing or refining? While you can summarize your idea in a line or two, you shouldn't be able to list all the nuances of character or conflict in a single sentence. What you know about your main character and important secondary characters should fill pages of notes. Even if you've settled on a conflict to drive the plot, still ask yourself "What if?" to see if that conflict is the most interesting thing you can come up with. What if your character's worse nightmare came true in the middle of the book? What if she lost the support of her best friend? What if you made your character tall instead of short, shy instead of outgoing? How would that change the story?

Make sure you have enough concrete details to give the plot and setting substance. Will your reader be able to picture exactly where and when the story is taking place? Is this character's goal or problem specific enough that the reader will believe it and care about it? Conflicts such as "wanting to be popular" are too broad to be compelling; they sound like the author is lumping his characters under the heading of "typical adolescent." Instead, refine the idea: a character desperately wants the lead in the school musical but an accident confines her to a wheelchair.

- Why do you love this idea? The best authors keep their audience in mind, but really write to please themselves. The magic happens when the author and reader share the same passion for an idea. So begin by reminding yourself why you want to write for children in the first place. Is it because you want to teach? If so, then search out the types of publishing best suited to your goals, such as nonfiction or religious books with strong moral undertones. Do you love the freedom of imagination and sense of wonder children possess? Then shake off the constraints of your own imagination when developing an idea. No matter what your reason, you have to be genuinely excited about this idea in order to convey that excitement to the reader.
- How will you sell this idea to an editor? Does your idea have a "hook," something that's original and surprising, that you can showcase when submitting the manuscript to an editor? Should the plot be summarized in its entirety in your query letter because the editor can't possibly guess the ending? Or does it sound like pieces from stories we've all read before, arranged in a new order but still familiar and predictable? While there's no way of knowing exactly what an editor will find compelling, you'll increase your odds by allowing your idea to simmer and looking at it from all angles before you begin to write.

So remember: While getting a good idea is important, that's just the beginning. How you execute that idea—how you stretch it, shape it, make it your own—could mean the difference between an easily-forgotten story and a cultural institution.

## **Develop a Successful Series**

The dream of many authors is to create a successful series. What could be better than having an entire shelf devoted to your books in Barnes & Noble? But developing a series is more difficult than it appears at first glance. Because of the time and money involved, publishers are scaling down the number of series they publish, especially from unknown writers.

Shelfspace in bookstores is at a premium, and unless a series is a sure winner, book buyers don't want to give a large portion of that space to a single author. The series that do succeed tend to fall into one of three categories:

### **Series built around a character:**

The Amelia Bedelia easy readers by Peggy Parish and the Anastasia Krupnik middle grade novels by Lois Lowry are two examples of series based on a character. In general, these series started off as a single title and then the character caught on, prompting the author to write more books. It's almost impossible to sell these books as a series from the start; publishers prefer to build the series one book at a time as the audience grows.

### **Series built around a premise:**

These books also have recurring characters, but those characters are brought together over and over by a plausible premise. The Babysitters Club by Ann M. Martin and the Magic School Bus by Joanna Cole are two examples. The cast of main characters is kept to a manageable number (three to five is average) and the premise is open ended enough to allow for a different plot in each book. Character development, especially for middle grade series, is key. Each book focuses on a different character of the recurring cast. This is the most common type of series, and the easiest to sell.

However, if your readers don't love your characters or believe that they would come together time and again, the series will fail.

### **Series built around a theme:**

These series are theme driven, rather than character driven. The Goosebumps horror series by R.L. Stine is a prime example. Though different characters appear in each book, the reader knows what to expect because the format of each story is similar. The trick is to develop a theme that is general enough to apply to several plots, yet enticing enough to hook your readers. Many authors try to create a series around the holidays, which limits the market to certain times of year. Unless you are a well-known author, theme driven fiction series are difficult to sell.

In nonfiction series, though, themes are a plus. If your theme ties in with school curriculum, a school district may purchase your entire series to use in the classrooms. Biographies of famous women scientists or books on inventions that changed the 20th century are two themes that might excite an educational publisher.

### **Proposing a series to a publisher**

When proposing a series, start small (three books is a good number). Outline the premise of the series in one or two paragraphs. Enclose a plot synopsis of each book in the series, and the first two or three chapters of the first book. For fiction, it also helps to write a brief character sketch of your main characters. For nonfiction, attach a chapter-by-chapter outline of the first book and a bibliography.

For any kind of series, make sure that each book can stand alone. Don't have your ending refer to something that's going to happen in the next book, or assume that by Book Three readers have read Books One and Two. It's always possible that a publisher will want to purchase only one book from your series proposal, and wait to see how it sells before contracting for the rest.

-----

Many series are developed by book packagers, who conceive and produce a series for a book publisher. Most packagers are open to proposals for new series ideas. To find a listing of book packagers, look in the *Literary Market Place* (an annual publishing directory by R.R. Bowker, found in most libraries) under "Book Producers." Be sure to send a SASE for guidelines before submitting.

## Enter Writing Contests

Annual writing contests should go on your submission list along with book or magazine publishers. Preparing for a contest teaches you how to follow strict submission guidelines, meet a deadline, and helps you practice patience (an important trait for successful authors) as you wait for results. Look for contests open to unpublished writers, and be sure you carefully read the rules before submitting (some contests require that the work not be submitted elsewhere while under consideration for the prize). Winning, or placing, in a contest can add heft to your writing credentials and give you a boost of confidence.

It's tempting to only go after the big awards— those contests sponsored by publishers that include cash prizes and a publishing contract (see sidebar at left). While winning such a contest can jumpstart an author's career (and even lead to publication by some nonwinners whose work the publisher also deems saleable), the competition is stiff because hundreds or even thousands of writers are vying for one award. So don't overlook the smaller contests, especially those that offer critiques along with prize money. And because the winning works generally aren't published, the author retains all rights and can still submit the manuscript to book or magazine publishers. Don't let the entry fees scare you— small organizations can't possibly award prize money without contestants paying a small sum. Notice that the deadlines for the smaller contests below are all in the first half of the year. This gives you plenty of time to plan ahead, because you should never throw together a contest entry. Submit only work that has been thoroughly revised, edited and polished. Each manuscript has only one shot, whether it's with an awards judge or an editor. Here are some annual contests to consider:

- **Byline Magazine Contests:** Four contests per month, for material for children and adults. Entry fee \$3-\$4. Small cash prizes. Names of authors are published, but not the winning entries. See [www.bylinemag.com](http://www.bylinemag.com).
- **Florida State Writing Competition** from the Florida Freelance Writers Association. Cash prize and certificate. See [www.writers-editors.com](http://www.writers-editors.com) and click on "Competition Guidelines" in the home page sidebar.

- Kay Snow Writers' Contest by the Willamette Writers Organization. See [www.willamettewriters.com](http://www.willamettewriters.com).
- Write It Now! Competition from SmartWriters.com. Winners receive a cash prize, writing books, and an editorial review. Six children's book categories. [www.SmartWriters.com](http://www.SmartWriters.com)
- Writing for Children Competiton by The Writers Union of Canada. Open to unpublished Canadian citizens and landed immigrants. Fiction or nonfiction up to 1500 words. See [www.writersunion.ca](http://www.writersunion.ca).
- Zola Literary Contest from the Pacific Northwest Writers Association. Cash prizes in 10 categories. See [www.pnwa.org/litcontest](http://www.pnwa.org/litcontest).

If you're an aspiring playwright, check out these playwriting competitions:

- Marilyn Hall Award for Youth Theatre from the Beverly Hills Theatre Guild, [www.beverlyhillstheatreguild.org/hall.htm](http://www.beverlyhillstheatreguild.org/hall.htm).
- National Children's Theatre Festival from the Actors' Playhouse at the Miracle Theatre. [www.actorsplayhouse.org/competition.htm](http://www.actorsplayhouse.org/competition.htm).



## Find the Right Publisher For Your Manuscript

How to find the right publisher for your manuscript? Research.

Editors always plead with authors to research the market before submitting manuscripts. This makes sense--it cuts down on the number of inappropriate submissions an editor may receive, and presumably will lower the chance of a manuscript getting rejected. But how, exactly, does one research a market that produces thousands of new products each year? I suggest a systematic, three-part approach which works for book and magazine publishers. This involves studying a publisher's overall list, individual books or issues, and their writers' guidelines. It doesn't matter which part you do first as long as you cover all three. (Note: Illustrators can use this same system to research potential illustration markets and then send for artists' guidelines.)

**Overall lists.** Book publishers have two lists: spring and fall. A magazine's "list" is comprised of a year's worth of issues. To get a sense of what each publisher does, read industry newsletters such as *Children's Book Insider*, attend writers' conferences, and consult *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market* (published annually by Writer's Digest Books). Note which publishers cater to the audience for whom you want to write, both in age group and subject matter. Send for these publishers' catalogs, generally free for a 9 x 12 self-addressed, stamped envelope with two to four first class stamps (bigger publishers=bigger catalogs). For magazines, get the most recent issue and then study back issues at the library. Many publishers also have web sites that feature their current lists, though I find it's easier to study and compare material if you have a hard copy.

But what if you receive several catalogs from large publishers and they all look the same? Then it's time to read the fine print and find the differences. Does HarperCollins seem to have an abundance of fiction picture books for ages 5-8? Then they might not be buying much for this age group for the next couple of years. Has another publisher just debuted a line of nonfiction chapter books? Maybe your chapter book on whales is just what they need. Do certain publishing giants tend to repackage classics from known authors rather than books from new writers? Pick another

publisher who isn't afraid to feature new talent. Narrow down your number of potential markets.

**Individual books or issues.** Go to a bookstore or library and actually hold books from your potential publishers in your hands. Look at the vocabulary and sentence structure, the style of writing, the pacing of picture book stories. For magazines, note length and subject matter of fiction and the slant on nonfiction topics. Though you don't want your book to be just like someone else's, it must fit in with the overall taste of the editors from each company, and the general tone of a publisher's list. Narrow down your markets once again.

**Writers' guidelines.** Now it's time to send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to each publisher asking for writers' guidelines. Follow the submissions procedures in the guidelines exactly. If you submit a manuscript or query letter more than a month after receiving guidelines, call the publisher to verify that they are still open to submissions.

Once your manuscript is in the mail, try to put it out of your mind and start writing something else. And be assured that all your research means your work is most likely headed to where it will be eagerly read.

## Impress an Editor

I love it when publishers send wish lists and ask me to spread the word to authors. Highlights magazine does this about twice a year, and if you read "At Presstime" last month, you saw how specific their requests are for manuscripts they'd like to see. Authors also appreciate detailed writers guidelines. Even if you don't plan on submitting to Morgan Reynolds Publishing, check out their submission guidelines at [www.morganreynolds.com](http://www.morganreynolds.com), if only to marvel at how much work went into them. You'll wonder why more publishers don't replace their call for "high-quality manuscripts" with information on exactly what high-quality means.

Wouldn't it be nice if editors could also post wish lists, not for the types of stories they'd like to publish, but for the quality of the writing? I know lots of editors who would love to issue proclamations such as, "Don't even think about sending me your work until you understand the difference between 'your' and 'you're'." But editors are, by and large, very nice people who wouldn't dream of being so rude. So I'll do the job for them. Here are some tidbits I've learned over the years.

- 1) Please learn to punctuate. A misplaced comma or two won't prevent you from getting published (publishers do have people on staff who correct those things), but if your manuscript is riddled with typos, it gives a bad first impression. To me, the most egregious offense is poor punctuation. It's easy to gloss over a misspelled word when reading a manuscript for the first time, but inappropriate semicolons or dialogue with all the quotation marks in the wrong place ruins the flow of the story. If you're not absolutely sure of your punctuation skills, have someone else proof your manuscript before you send it out.
- 2) Don't rhyme unless you have to. Many authors think picture books equal rhyming stories. The problem is that most people can't write very well in rhyme. The rhyming format should be the last thing you think about— first comes the character development, then the plot, then the pacing and tightly-written text. If all that's in place, then you can overlay the rhyme, without adding any extra, unnecessary details to the story. Only tell a story in rhyme if it's absolutely the best way— the only way— it can be told.

- 3) Only develop ideas worth spending a lot of money on. Did you know it costs a major publisher over \$100,000 to get a picture book from manuscript to the book store? Is your idea worth that much of a risk? Novels cost less to produce (no color illustrations) but the market is smaller. Books that are simply cute, sweet, informative, or teach an important lesson don't do enough to justify the publisher's financial risk. Manuscripts need to do more than one thing. So develop ideas that are funny and teach science concepts, or are multicultural, entertaining, and illustrate an important life lesson without preaching to the reader.
- 4) Pay attention to established age groups and word counts. Once you're famous, you can break all the rules you want. In the meantime, you need to write within established guidelines so editors can visualize exactly where your book would fit on their list, and (more importantly) how their sales reps would pitch it to a book store. Don't submit a 3000 word picture book for ages 3-6. It simply won't fit into 32 pages with illustrations. Don't write a 15-chapter easy reader. Most second graders will be intimidated by a book that long. Be creative with your story, not its format.
- 5) If you're writing for older readers, understand the distinction between middle grade and young adult. Read several novels for ages 8-12, and for ages 12 and up, so you can begin to see the difference in characters and conflicts for the two age groups. Very often beginning writers think they're writing YA, but they've actually created a middle grade novel with 15-year-old characters. And do incorporate subplots into your story. These books need to have several layers— some emotional, some action-driven— that all work together to build the plot.
- 6) If your story is very personal and specific to your life/family, consider self-publishing. For your life to be interesting to a wide audience, you must be willing to sacrifice the facts when necessary to make good fiction. The incidents need a universal theme that's relevant to many children. If you have your heart set on writing a book about all the funny, mischievous things your kids and pets did when they were little, and you don't want to alter any events to create a solid, unique plot, then self-publish a few copies at your local copy

shop and give them to family members at the next reunion. Your book will be treasured by the people who will appreciate it the most.

- 7) Don't think you can abandon logic just because you're writing for children. Several years ago, I worked with a writer who was creating a middle grade fantasy set in the distant past, and yet one of his characters had a few modern-day items in his bedroom. I explained that, even though the book was fantasy, 21st century devices couldn't exist if he clearly stated the story happened long ago. "Kids aren't going to care," was his response.

But they will. Even picture book readers will wonder why your spider character carries a life-sized baseball in his pocket. And then your credibility as an author is shot. If you maintain logic in the details, you can get away with a far greater suspension of disbelief in the story. And a story that's a delight to believe is what editors wish for most of all.

## Improve Your Chances of Getting Published

- Write on a regular basis. I'm not going to tell you to write every day, though that's great if you can make it work. But what's more important is to find a schedule you can stick to. If you set the bar too high, it will be easy to give up. So think about what's realistic for your life: three evenings a week, all day on Fridays, every Sunday afternoon. Then do it.
- Read trade journals once a month. Keeping up with the publishing industry is an important part of developing a writing career. Set aside one afternoon a month to visit the library and browse through *Publishers Weekly*, *Horn Book*, *School Library Journal* and other trade magazines. Note which books are getting the most attention from reviewers, or are placed prominently in publishers' ads. Also read reviews of books similar to what you'd like to write. If you can't make it to the library, most trade journals have feature articles posted on their web sites, where you can do a search for anything related to children's book publishing.
- Read newsletters and publishers' catalogs. It's easy to get behind with reading your subscription newsletters or keeping up with catalogs from publishers. Try leaving a stack of reading material on the table where you eat breakfast, and take 10 minutes a day to read while you're eating. If you commute to work, carry the current issue of *Children's Book Insider*, *The Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators Bulletin*, or a few publishing catalogs instead of the daily newspaper to look at on the bus or during your lunch hour. You can also spend an afternoon once a month in the library studying catalogs from children's book publishers (ask the children's librarian to show you where they're stored).
- Read at least one new well-reviewed or award-winning children's book a month. Study the books that are getting attention, especially if they're for the same age group for which you want to write. Focus on the plot structure in fiction titles or the presentation of information in nonfiction, as well as character development, dialogue and writing style. After you've read the book, pick it apart. How many characters did the author need to tell the story? Where

did the author choose to end each chapter? How many words are on each page of a picture book? How much description did the author include, and what was left up to the illustrator? Note which elements you'd like to incorporate into your own writing, as well as what you didn't like about the book.

- Plan to attend one writer's conference this year. Writing conferences are terrific places to meet editors and agents, learn about new markets and trends, and network with other writers. Many conferences also offer one-on-one manuscript critiques. For conferences in your area, check out the Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators ([www.scbwi.org](http://www.scbwi.org)), or the conference listings in the *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market* (Writer's Digest Books).
- Enroll in at least one writing workshop this year. Writing workshops or classes differ from conferences in that they give intensive, focused instruction on the writing process. Many classes include writing exercises and the chance to have your work critiqued during the sessions. For classes in your area, check with your local community college, continuing education center, or public library. Also visit [www.WeMakeWriters.com](http://www.WeMakeWriters.com) for information on Children's Authors' Bootcamp workshops held around the country.
- Join (or recommit to) a critique group. Meeting regularly with a critique group can be invaluable to writers of any level. Try to find a group of people who are all working on children's books and who are familiar enough with the children's market to be able to give you useful feedback on the quality of your writing. Inquire with your local SCBWI chapter, information desk at the library, or nearby bookstores for existing groups in your area. Attending a critique group regularly (even if you don't always have a manuscript to read) will sharpen your editing skills. It also doesn't hurt to have a community of writers to commiserate with when the rejections come, and to help celebrate those hard-earned sales.

## Know If Your Agent is Right For You

It's still possible to place a children's book with a publisher without agent representation, and often authors prefer to have complete control over their first few books. But if you have an agent (or are thinking about getting one) it's important to approach the agent/author relationship as something that ideally will last for many years.

First, let's review the basic outline of the agent's job. A good literary agent has knowledge of the marketplace and knows what kinds of books individual editors like. He or she submits the author's manuscripts to publishers and gets faster responses than if the author would alone (unless the author already has a connection with an editor). The agent negotiates the publishing contract and often handles subsidiary rights sales (foreign rights, book club sales, movie rights, etc.) Many agents offer editorial guidance on manuscripts and book proposals as well as overall career advice. Once you've found an agent who wants to represent you, how do you know it's the right fit? And what are the warning signs that an existing relationship has run its course? Here are some points to consider:

- Do you have clear expectations about the agent's job? Do you want someone to simply handle the business end of your writing, or do you also want someone to bounce new ideas off of, act as first editor for your work, and give you critical feedback on your latest manuscript? Make a list of everything you'd ideally like from your agent, and then discuss it. This should be handled before signing a contract with a new agent, but it can also be done about once a year in an ongoing relationship. The agent may have a different view of her role; it's best to talk about these issues before you become frustrated. The agent may not feel qualified to provide certain services you'd like. If that's the case, look around for other representation. Remember, though, that your agent has other clients. Be realistic about how much personal attention and time you want your agent to give you. A daily or even weekly update of your manuscript's submissions might be out of the question, but perhaps a scheduled 15-minute phone consultation once a month, or a biweekly email status report, might be acceptable to both of you.



- Do you feel your agent is keeping your long-term career in mind? Good agents try to place books with editors who will help the author's career in the long run. They know when editors are developing new series and looking for writers, and recommend their clients for the job. They work to negotiate higher advances for the second or third book with the same publisher. If you feel your agent is more concerned with a quick sale than a good sale, or isn't interested in helping you stretch your potential as a writer, it might be time to move on. But talk about it first. It could be your agent is doing these things but failed to inform you of submissions she's made on your behalf or why an editor didn't offer a bigger advance on your most recent book.
- Are you comfortable with your agent as your advocate? Agents take a lot of pressure off of writers because they deal with asking for more money, tracking down missing royalty statements, or following up on manuscript submissions. The author is free to work with the editor on writing a better book. But some agents have a very aggressive style of negotiating. You want your editor and others at the publishing house to welcome submissions from your agent because they respect the agent's judgement, and not dread working with your agent (and by association, you). You also want to know your agent has enough clout to keep your book from being dropped if your editor leaves the company (while this might be out of an agent's control, an experienced agent could make a difference). If you sense your agent's style is hurting rather than helping your career, you might want to look elsewhere for representation.
- Can your agent grow with you? A small agency may have been perfect when you were just starting out and needed a lot of personal attention. But now you're the author of several well-known books and series, and you want your agent to handle movie rights on your behalf. Does she have the connections and expertise to pull it off? Or perhaps you started out as a solid nonfiction writer, but now want to try your hand at selling young adult fiction. Does your agent know the right editors for your manuscript? If you're branching out in a new direction, make sure your agent can still adequately represent you. If not, then perhaps you can arrange for your agent to represent your older work, or work from one genre, and find another agent for your newer books. But be sure to discuss this with your agent first (especially if you're on good terms) before making any changes.

Remember that the author/agent relationship, no matter how friendly, is still a business transaction. Bring up any grievances in a calm, professional way and try to solve them before taking drastic action. And realize that, no matter how much you like your agent as a person, there may be a time when it's in the best interest of your career to move on. Ultimately, you're in control of your writing career and have the right to be represented by someone who will work as hard selling your book as you did writing it.

## Know If Your Story Is Ready to Submit

At a recent session of the Children's Authors' Bootcamp workshop that I co-teach with author Linda Arms White, one of the attendees asked me how an author knows when her story is ready to submit to publishers. My facetious, off-the-cuff answer had something to do with a beam of light shining down from above, illuminating the manuscript. I then went on to try to answer the question in earnest, ending with, "The first time you think your manuscript is finished, it never is."

There isn't a writer alive who hasn't wished for some sort of literary oven in which to place their manuscript, knowing when the timer goes off it's done. Unfortunately, there is no such objective measurement for good writing. Therefore, the best advice I can give is to get as much input on your completed manuscript as possible before putting it in the mail.

Writing is a solitary endeavor, with authors carefully guarding their ideas and feeling tremendous ownership of the finished project. As they should. But in order for a manuscript to become a book, it has to pass muster with many people, from editors to sales reps to accountants to art directors. Once in book form, those ideas must then appeal to reviewers, bookstore owners, librarians and consumers, not to mention kids. No matter how stellar you think your writing is, if others don't share your opinion, your manuscript will never make it farther than your file cabinet.

The first "second reader" of your writing is you. You need to remove your author's hat and adopt the reader's viewpoint. You can't do this as soon as you've written the last word of the manuscript. Put some distance between yourself and the project. Take time off, start working on something else. Then read the work and try to measure it against what you consider to be high standards. Does the pacing compare to a published work in the same genre by an author you admire? Are the characters as fully developed as those by acclaimed authors writing for this age group? Does the dialogue actually sound like words real, live people you know might say? If you wrote an outline for your book, compare the finished plot to what you intended to write from the outline. Did you leave out any important elements? Did you add anything that's unnecessary? If you're writing nonfiction, did you do enough research, or did you have to pad areas with "filler"?

Then, take your book out into the world. The first stop should be your writer's group. Ideally, this is comprised of people who are all writing and/or studying children's books. Listen to their comments and take them seriously. You don't have to make any suggested changes, but you should consider the reasons for changes offered by the readers. If more than one reader doesn't understand a plot twist, doesn't believe a character would act a certain way, can't accurately visualize a setting, it's your problem, not theirs. It doesn't matter how inspired the idea is inside your head; if you can't accurately communicate this idea on paper, no one will ever pick up your book.

This process of frank editing and honest critique can take several rounds before the book is "done." Ending the process too soon will only lead to frustration and rejection letters. Declaring "I just have to find an editor who understands my book" can be just as bad. Yes, a good author/editor fit is important to the success of any book, but once you decide you want to get your work published, it ceases to be a solitary exercise. You have to know that your story makes sense to other people, and the only way to do this is to get input from outside yourself and consider it carefully.

In the end, no book is ever really finished. I've spoken with many published authors who wish they could take back their books for one more run through the editing mill. Every time we write we improve our skills a little more. One final aspect then, of knowing when a book is done, is learning to walk that fine line between making it better and letting it go. Learn to recognize when a manuscript is as strong as you can make it, and then send it out and begin your next masterpiece.

## Pitch a Series Idea to a Publisher

Every publisher is slightly different when it comes to series proposals, so always send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the publisher's editorial department for guidelines before submitting. But here are the basic rules:

**Fiction series.** Fiction series tend to be a group of books featuring the same characters with some sort of hook that holds the characters, and the series, together. You'll want to write an overview of the series concept (keep it to a page or less) and also a description of each major character (one or two paragraphs about the character's physical and personality traits, family and background). You'll then provide a synopsis of each book in the series (a page or less per title), and the entire manuscript of the first book.

Picture book fiction series are rare. Often, a picture book is published and the response is so great that the author writes another book with the same characters. The "series" then gradually grows one book at a time. If you have a picture book manuscript that stands alone, but you envision several more books revolving around the same characters, don't propose it as a series from the start. Concentrate on selling the first book and then approach the editor with your other ideas.

**Nonfiction series.** Nonfiction series can be for any age group and have an overall theme and format. The proposal involves a description of the series; a synopsis or chapter- by-chapter outline of each book; a bibliography of resources; and two chapters from the first book (or the entire manuscript if it's shorter than a chapter book).

Nonfiction publishers sometimes have very specific requirements for series proposals, so it's essential to send for guidelines before submitting.

## Plan a School Presentation

Before you accept an invitation from a school or library, think carefully about the program you want to create. There are three basic types of author or illustrator programs that you can present.

- A Personal History Presentation. This talk includes personal background, introduces your books, and allows time for answering questions from children.
- A Performance Presentation. For this dramatic presentation, your work takes center stage. You can read from your work, draw pictures, show slides, and save personal information for the question-and-answer period.
- A Teaching Presentation. This approach focuses on teaching the process of your craft. You can design grade-appropriate lessons to illustrate the various aspects of writing or drawing.

Presentations can vary with the size of the group and the nature of your visit. If you're addressing a young writer's conference, you may want to start with a Personal History Presentation and save the Teaching Presentation for small-group time.

No matter which kind of presentation you design, remember that you're speaking to children. You must keep the presentation lively, interactive and upbeat. For many children, this is their first opportunity to see and hear a real, live author or illustrator. They'll want to ask questions, so leave time for a question-and-answer period.

When you're preparing for a school visit, ask yourself: What age group will I be talking to and what will they want to know? This will keep you on track. Presentations are like stories. They have a beginning, a middle and an end.

The opening, or beginning, sets the mood, the pace, and the audience's expectations. It hooks the children into listening. Tell them in advance what you plan to talk about and how the presentation will be organized.

## **Planning a Personal History Presentation**

You'll want to include:

- > Information about yourself
- > Information about your work
- > Examples of or stories about your work
- > Time for questions
- > Book sales and autograph session

Keep the opening informal. Tell students a little about your family, your home town and your pets.

In the body of the speech, explain what type of writing you do, how many books you've published, why you write for children, how you get ideas and what a typical day in your life is like. If you're the author or illustrator of a picture book, make slides of the book. Slides make it easier for a large group to see the work.

End your talk with a personal story that reveals something about you and your writing. During the question-and-answer period, remind the students that questions begin with who, what, where, when, why and how. Try to keep them on track. When a question's been asked, repeat it so that everyone can hear.

## **Planning a Performance Presentation**

Consider including in your program:

- > An overview of your work
- > Readings from the text
- > Demonstration of how you draw

- > Slides or video shows
  
- > Storytelling
  
- > Book sales and autograph session

In a Performance Presentation, you focus on your work. The students in your audience will be interested in how your work has changed and evolved. They'll want to know about your creative process. You may decide to show them how a character develops from early sketches to the finished product. Choose a particularly exciting part of your book and read it to them. Stories come alive when they're read, especially by their creators. If you're an illustrator, the audience can help you create a character. Take suggestions from the students and draw on an easel in front of the group. Sign the finished product and leave it for the school as a souvenir of your visit.

The Performance Presentation lends itself well to slides or videos. Make slides of your book. As your career grows, you can rearrange your slides for different styles of presentations.

The benefit of a Performance Presentation is that you become a live storyteller to the children. Practice reading your books so you can perform them from memory. Storytelling will give your talk pizzazz.

### **Planning a Teaching Presentation**

When teaching, it's helpful to:

- > Introduce one aspect of writing or illustrating
  
- > Read or show samples from your work or the work of others
  
- > Allow time for students to practice the concept
  
- > Share and evaluate
  
- > Sell and autograph your books



A Teaching Presentation can be an opportunity to teach what you love -- the process or writing or illustrating. This type of presentation works best with grades three and up, for groups no larger than 25 students. In a Teaching Presentation, you have an opportunity to introduce a concept, explain it in detail, and engage the students in practicing the skill. Choose a single aspect of writing or illustrating, such as showing not telling, descriptive paragraphs, good characterization, layout, design or color. Create a lesson plan that introduces your concept. For instance, explain what a good lead or "hook" is. Read the first paragraph from your book or the books of others to illustrate the point. Work first as a group, then let each child practice individually. Encourage the children to share what they've learned with the group. There are many books on how to teach writing to children. Look through them to get ideas for lessons. You may want to leave a lesson plan with the teacher so that children can review the skill.

If you have extra time, talk to the children about their favorite books and authors and ask them what they think makes a good book.

## Protect Yourself When Dealing with Publishers and Agents

When entering into a business agreement with a literary agent or publisher, it's up to you to do your homework. New agents and small presses can offer more opportunities to first-time authors, but might not have a reassuring track record of doing business themselves. So how do you know which companies are good risks?

1. Use common sense. While industry resources like trade journals, newsletters, and books such as *Guide to Literary Agents* and *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market* do their best to verify a company's business practices before listing them, if an agent or publisher is just starting out, there isn't much to go on. If you want access to new companies that are actively seeking authors, then you do assume some risk. A good rule of thumb is to avoid any business that asks you for money. The Association of Author's Representatives (AAR) has a policy of requiring that its members never charge a reading fee for manuscripts from potential clients. Publishers should pay you to publish your manuscript; if you have to cover any of the production costs, you're probably dealing with a vanity or co-op press rather than a traditional publisher. There are a few exceptions: some small presses may ask authors to forgo an advance payment against future royalties (getting paid only after the book starts selling), or to pitch in on marketing efforts. You'll have to judge for yourself if this arrangement is right for you.
2. Check out the company. AAR's web site ([www.aar-online.org](http://www.aar-online.org)) lists their members, and has a comprehensive Frequently Asked Questions section explaining the author/agent relationship, and what authors should look for in an agent. If a publisher is brand new, get as much information as you can. Google the editor's name or search the *Publishers Weekly* web site ([www.publishersweekly.com](http://www.publishersweekly.com)) for announcements of the start-up. If the editor has extensive industry experience, chances are he knows what he's doing. If the agent lists books she's represented, or the publisher has its first list in the stores, go look at the books.
3. Ask questions. Every business relationship is unique, and so no market source can provide a guaranteed one-size-fits-all listing of agents and publishers.

Don't be afraid to ask questions about your project. Has the agent sold books similar to yours? Where does she intend to submit your manuscript? How does the publisher plan to market your book? Does the publisher have an illustrator in mind, and when will this illustrator be available? Does the editor think your manuscript is perfect as is, or does it need editing? (There's no such thing as a perfect manuscript, so editors who don't edit are a red flag.)

4. Read the contract. Make sure you sign a contract with your agent. At the very least, the contract should have a termination clause that allows either party to end the relationship with a certain amount of notice (though the agent will still collect commission on any manuscripts she's sold prior to termination). If you don't have an agent, either hire a literary attorney to look over and explain a publisher's contract to you, or educate yourself. Some good books on contracts are listed in the sidebar.
5. If in doubt, don't sign. It's far better to keep submitting your manuscript than to enter into an agreement you'll regret. Weigh the pros and cons and make a choice that's right for you. And remember that there's no guarantee for the agent, publisher or author that the book will sell. All you can do is gather information, be as objective as possible, and make the leap. If you chose wrong, you'll have another chance with your next book.

## Select the Correct Submission Format for Your Manuscript

The one question visitors to our web site ask the most is “How do I submit my manuscript to publishers?” While the submission process may feel like second nature to experienced writers, it’s easy to forget that newcomers aren’t aware of the specific procedures. And since everyone can benefit from a refresher course now and then, here’s a rundown of the steps:

First, collect addresses of appropriate publishers by perusing market guides like *Children’s Writer’s & Illustrator’s Market* (Writer’s Digest Books), industry newsletters such as CBI, and looking through similar books at the store or library. Then send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the publisher asking for writer’s guidelines (you can start this process while you’re still writing your book as it may take a few weeks to receive a response). Review the guidelines carefully to make sure your manuscript fits with what the publisher is looking for.

### **PICTURE BOOKS:**

Most publishers want to see the entire manuscript for picture books. Type your manuscript on white paper, double-spaced, indenting at the beginning of each paragraph. Use at least one-inch margins on each side, and justify the left margin only. Put your name and the title of the book at the top of each page, and number the pages consecutively. Your name, address, phone number and email should appear in the upper left-hand corner of the first page. Center the title of the manuscript about a third of the way down on page 1, skip a line, and then start the text.

Don’t break the text up into pages as it would appear in the finished book, and don’t include illustrations unless you’re a professional artist (in which case, send a black and white dummy with a sketch of each illustration and 2-3 copies of finished color illustrations along with the typed manuscript). Send with a brief cover letter stating the title, intended age group, and word count of the story. Add any previous publishing experience and memberships to writing organizations (if you don’t have such experience, leave this section out). Mention if this is a simultaneous submission (sending the manuscript to several publishers at once), and include a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) with enough postage to return the manuscript if necessary.

### **LONGER FICTION:**

For longer fiction, publishers often want a query letter and sample chapters. The query starts out with the same basic information as the cover letter above, but also includes a brief synopsis of the plot. Try to write the query in the same style as the manuscript, and include information on the main characters, the conflict and the resolution of the plot. Add your publishing experience, and tell the editor you can send the entire manuscript if she's interested. Ideally, the entire query letter will fit on one page. Send with the first two chapters of the manuscript and a SASE.

### **LONGER NONFICTION:**

For longer nonfiction, a book proposal is generally requested. This gives a brief overview of the book (one or two paragraphs describing the tone and slant of the information), and a chapter-by-chapter outline (with a sentence or two listing the information covered in each chapter). Attach the first two chapters if it's requested in the writer's guidelines, and also a bibliography of your resources. In your cover letter, list the target audience, the estimated length of the finished manuscript, why your book is different from others on the market on the same subject, and your expertise on the topic. Send with a SASE.

### **NONFICTION PICTURE BOOKS:**

Nonfiction picture book publishers may require a query (in which case you'd outline the book in one or two paragraphs and also include the information from the nonfiction cover letter above), or the entire manuscript. If sending the whole manuscript, attach a brief cover letter as with fiction picture books, but also mention how your book fits into the current market and your credentials on the topic.

Following the proper submission procedures gets easier with practice, and ensures that your manuscript will get a serious look. Take the time to give each editor exactly what she wants, and she'll give your work closer consideration.

## Stand Out From the Slushpile

Every editor will tell you that the fastest route to selling your work is to write a strong manuscript. But when your carefully-crafted book lands in the infamous slush pile, how will it stand out from the hundreds of other unsolicited manuscripts each publisher receives? While submission guidelines offer very little room for creative interpretation, there are a few things you can do to make your work rise above the rest.

1. Be professional. Though this may sound obvious, it bears repeating. Any submission that does not include a self-addressed, stamped envelope for the manuscript's return (or a letter-sized SASE for the editor's reply, if you don't want your manuscript sent back), will get tossed in the trash. Cover or query letters with typos or grammatical errors mean the accompanying manuscript pages won't get read. Editors have so many manuscripts to read that they don't have to contend with sloppy presentations or authors who can't follow the guidelines. It's that simple.
2. Include personal information in your cover or query letter when it's relevant. If your fiction caters to a niche market in which you're considered an expert, or you're writing nonfiction on a topic you've studied for years, briefly mention your qualifications. For example, if you're proposing an easy reader series and you've taught reading to second graders for 10 years, that's something the editor should know. If you've been recognized in some way (you've earned professional awards, you chair a national or regional committee, you've been cited as an expert in newspaper articles) and it ties in directly with your book, list these accomplishments. A magazine article that describes your research or work in an area covered by your book could be attached to the query letter.
3. Include a related photograph with your query or manuscript submission. If you've uncovered some interesting photographs during your nonfiction research, attach a copy of one picture to your book proposal. If you've unearthed a rare photograph of the subject of your historical novel, a copy can

be included with your query. Seeing such a photograph can help bring the subject to life for an editor.

4. Highlight your “hook”. This doesn’t apply to every manuscript, but if your book is based on something unusual such as old letters your grandfather wrote while overseas during World War II, or a 100-year-old diary you discovered in the attic of your house, add this intriguing information to your cover or query letter. The same applies to cutting-edge nonfiction research, especially if you have access to experts in the field.
5. Define the market. If you tell the editor the size of the potential market for your book, it helps her visualize your manuscript as a finished, actively-selling product. Base your projections on actual numbers: “*Publishers Weekly* recently stated that the number of students entering middle school will nearly double over the next 10 years, creating a large market for new young adult fiction,” or “Two million adopted children in the US come from foreign countries, and more and more parents are struggling with ways to assimilate these children into our society while still retaining roots to their native cultures.” Note the competition for nonfiction or niche fiction books, and explain how yours is different. If you have professional associations with groups who would buy your book, or if you regularly attend trade shows where your book could be sold, tell the editor. Finally, if you have experience marketing yourself (you’ve done radio interviews, you’re comfortable speaking at conferences, etc.) say you’d take an active role in selling your book.
6. Package it right. It’s tempting to include the stuffed turtle you made to go with your nonfiction series, or a dozen gingerbread cookies to accompany your Christmas story. Every editor has tales of opening a manuscript box to find some non-book item fall out, whether it’s glitter, food or rubber snakes. This is meant to be endearing, but most of the time it’s annoying. The same goes for electric green envelopes, scented stationery, or manuscripts that arrive by Federal Express. In large publishing houses, submissions are usually opened by an editorial assistant, so the accouterments never make it to the editor’s desk. At smaller publishers, where editors may open their own mail, these efforts to stand out may be seen as a desperate attempt to distract from weak writing. However, if an illustrator is submitting samples directly to the art

director, a bit of artistic expression on the envelope is acceptable. Just make sure the contents are presented professionally.

7. Join SCBWI. Membership to the Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators tells an editor you're committed to learning about writing and have probably done more homework on each potential publisher than the average first-time writer. Some editors are taking unsolicited submissions from SCBWI members only. For membership information, visit their web site at [www.scbwi.org](http://www.scbwi.org).



## Target the Right Publisher (by Liza Burby)

Though you may type the words "the end" on your manuscript, we writers all know that finishing your children's book is really just the beginning. The next task is to send those words out in the hopes that a publisher will want to turn them into a book contract. In your enthusiasm, you may be tempted to blanket the publishing world with your book proposals. But doing so is a waste of time and money because all publishers are different, so you may inadvertently send your manuscript to a publisher who wouldn't ever consider your type of story, and miss out on another one that might snap it up. That's why targeting the publisher that is the best fit for your manuscript reduces your likelihood of receiving those dreaded rejection letters.

To help increase your chances of being published, it's crucial to research publishers not only through Children's Writer's and Illustrator's Market (published by Writer's Digest Books and sold in book stores) and Literary Market Place (found in most libraries), but also by visiting bookstores and libraries to study the books publishers have produced. Assess if any of these publishers would make a good home for your manuscript by using the following criteria.

- *Publisher's Specialty.* Publishers, no matter how big or how small, specialize in certain markets, like nonfiction versus fiction, preschool versus young adult. Large-sized companies will likely serve many specialties throughout their many imprints. Most medium and small publishers tend to have one or only a few specialties. Figure out which one seems like a good match for your work.
- *Company Age.* How important is the age of a company to you? Certainly companies that have been around for many years have a proven track record so you can check on their successes and failures. But newer companies may be hungrier for sales and more willing to take a chance on a new writer to promote.
- *Company Size.* The fewer books published annually, the smaller the house. Smaller houses tend to have more time and resources to devote to their writers than do large houses. But larger companies have name recognition and strong

distribution outlets. Will you be satisfied working with a small publisher, or is the status of a large, well-known house what you really want?

- *Quality of Work.* Some publishers invest only the minimal amount of money in production costs, like the paper stock and art work. Others put quite a bit of money and time into their books, producing beautiful hardbacks with quality paper and art. If the appearance of your book in final form is important to you, examine the existing products of any prospective publisher either through their catalogs or in stores.
- *Marketing and Sales.* Most likely media exposure and good placement in a bookstore matters to you, so a publisher's marketing and sales plans should be important points to consider. Study *Publisher's Weekly* to learn about a publisher's book campaigns. You can also call the publisher's marketing and sales department to get some basic information about their operation.
- *Publicity.* One aspect of marketing is publicity. That's the arm by which your work gets reviewed by newspapers and magazines. Ask your local bookstore owner which publishers routinely have their authors give book signings. Read your local paper and national magazines to see which company often has their books reviewed. The size of the company doesn't always determine the amount of publicity their books garner.
- *The Offer.* When it comes to money matters, you'll want to find out what type of advance or royalty payment you can expect to receive for your book. Not all publishing companies offer their authors advances. Since the money offered in an advance will be deducted from future royalties, this may not be an important issue for you in your search for a publisher. On the other hand, if you need the immediate income an advance provides, you should consider only those publishers that make such offerings.

These criteria should help you assess the publishers to whom you want to send your work. Then, with your researched list in hand, you can send out that book proposal knowing that you've enhanced your prospects of being published.

-----

Liza N. Burby is the author of 38 children's books. For more information about choosing the right publisher for your manuscript, see her new book *How to Publish Your Children's Book: A Complete Guide to Making the Right Publisher Say Yes* by Square One Publishers. It's available from CBI. Call 800/807- 1916 to order.

## **Tell an Editor What The Illustrations Should Look Like**

Picture book writers are often surprised to find out that they generally have no say in what the illustrations will look like, but there's a good reason for this practice. Picture books are really two stories, one contained in the words, the other in the pictures. It's the author's job to create the plot, characters and setting. The author gives the story a voice, whether it's funny, scary, whimsical or dramatic. But it's up to the illustrator to conceive the visual aspect of these elements and provide another level to the story. The author has to trust the editor to choose an illustrator who can do justice to her story; who can interpret her words and bring them to life.

Because most authors aren't also illustrators, they tend to think literally. If an author has a redheaded girl in mind for her main character, she may feel that the story hinges on this character's hair color. But in most cases it doesn't. Unless the character's hair plays a big role in the story, the author shouldn't waste words by describing it to the reader, nor should she describe it for the illustrator. And if the artist draws the character as a blonde, chances are he'll also portray delightful aspects of this character's personality that the author never thought of.

So to answer the question: an author doesn't provide directions for the illustrator. There are a few exceptions: If the story takes place in an exotic location and the author has photographs or research materials that might help the illustrator with the setting, this can be briefly mentioned in the cover letter. Likewise, if there is an important aspect of the character that's not mentioned in the text (a character's race, for example) the author can mention this as well. Otherwise, stick to the words and chances are you'll be pleasantly surprised by the pictures.

## Tell if a New or Small Press is Legitimate

It seems like every day you can open up a trade journal and read about a new publisher entering the children's book scene. While most of these publishers are well-funded and have some sort of background in the industry, a few may be bad risks for an author or illustrator. Here are some ways you can check out a publisher before signing a contract:

- See if the publisher is listed in *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market*. This won't apply if the publisher is brand new, but if the company is at least a year old it could be listed in CWIM, or similar trade directories. CWIM checks out publishers before listing them, and if the directory receives three or more complaints about a company, the listing is removed the following year. Was the publisher listed last year but not in the current edition?
- Look at the publisher's catalog. Is the catalog designed in a professional manner? Not all catalogs have to be glossy, four-color publications, but they should include pictures of each book cover with information about the book and how to order it. Make sure the publisher can fulfill orders in four weeks or less.
- Look at other books the publisher has produced. Are the paper and binding of good quality? Do you like the design? Do you feel the book is priced comparably to other similar books on the market?
- Ask about the publisher's distribution system. Are the publisher's books distributed by a well-known wholesaler or distributor, or is the publisher relying mainly on direct mail to sell books? Many small presses sell most of their books through mail order and do quite well. It's important, however, that the publisher has good mailing lists that will be relevant to your book. (General fiction doesn't do as well with direct mail as nonfiction, for which a very specific market can be targeted.)

- Go to a large bookstore and ask to order one of the publisher's books. If that bookstore can't find either the publisher or the distributor in its computer, it will have trouble ordering your title when it's published.
- Ask the publisher how your book will be marketed. Does the publisher have a solid marketing plan, or will you be relied upon to do most of the marketing yourself?
- Talk to the person who will be editing your book. Is your editor enthusiastic about your work, and does he or she have specific, in-depth ideas about needed changes in the text? Very few manuscripts arrive at a publisher's office in perfect shape. If your editor has no changes in mind, question him or her about areas in the manuscript you may feel are weak. See if the editor has constructive ideas for revisions. If you're an illustrator, speak with the art director. Find out how much guidance you will be given while illustrating the book, or if you will be working with no direction. Are the editor and art director accessible? Do they return your phone calls? Once an offer has been made on a book, they should call you back within a reasonable time period.
- Read the contract carefully. Make sure it contains a projected publication date, the author or illustrator retains copyright to the work, and that money is accounted for properly. Many smaller presses don't pay advances, but they give higher royalties or pay more often (every month or every 60 days). Be sure you don't have to pay the publisher any money to produce your book.

It's not possible to follow all these steps, of course, if the publisher is new and hasn't produced its first list. In that case you could ask to contact some other authors or illustrators the publisher is working with, and get their impressions of the company. By and large, most new publishers are legitimate, sincere and dedicated professionals, and are not a bad risk for the author or illustrator. These people will not object to your researching the company. Those who do should be approached with caution.

## Understand an Editor

In an increasingly impersonal, computerized world, it's comforting to know that the industry within which we toil --publishing--is still ruled by real, live humans. OK, so some of those humans happen to be bean counters, obsessed with sales projections and profitability reports. Fortunately, though, there remains a human core to the industry that appreciates artistry, encourages creativity and truly seeks to make a positive difference in the world. It's time to give editors a little love.

They're underpaid, underappreciated and overworked. They have to sift through countless horrible manuscripts to find the occasional gem. And, when they do find a winner, they get none of the glory. (Quick, name the editor who greenlighted Harry Potter.... See what I mean?)

I raise these points not simply to give editors some richly-deserved sympathy and respect. Rather, I do it to start you thinking in a way that can truly benefit your writing career. Taking the time to understand the life of an editor--what drives her, what moves her, what catches her attention--will make you a smarter, better and more successful author. In fact, one can argue that the phrase "give an editor what she needs, when she needs it" pretty much sums up the secret of making it as a children's book writer.

(A quick note--I tend to refer to editors generically as females. While most editors are women, there are many superb male editors at houses large and small. No offense intended, gents. I simply can't abide using the phrase "he or she" or "him or her" over and over.)

So then, what do you need to know about our friend the editor, and how can you benefit from the knowledge?

- Reality #1: She's swamped. Editors are buried with submissions. Most of them have no chance of ever getting published: they're not properly formatted, ignore age-range and page-length standards, don't match the publisher's needs and worse. Success Strategy: Know all the rules before submitting. Take guidelines seriously. Research the publisher's catalog and make certain your

manuscript fits their style and scope. These simple steps, so often ignored, will give you a huge edge.

- Reality #2: She's walking a tightrope. Remember those old cartoons where a character had an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other? Being an editor is sort of like that--on the one hand, editors are trained to seek out creativity and artistic accomplishment. On the other, they have to deliver books that will make the publisher money. Most editors have far too much pride in their work to simply rubberstamp overly commercial pap and call it a day. However, they also have mortgages to pay and mouths to feed. Success Strategy: Don't allow your work to veer too far to the commercial or too far to the "art for art's sake" side. Keep pushing yourself creatively, but take the time to study current bestsellers to learn what makes them "tick." Also, in your query and cover letters, help an editor see the commercial potential of your manuscript by indicating the size and scope of a potential audience for the book. (For example, your book deals with adoption. Research how many adoptive families are in the US, how many web sites exist on the topic, how many groups with newsletter and speaking opportunities are out there, etc., and make the case that a large, easily-reached market for the book is already in place.) You'll look smart, you'll demonstrate to the editor that you understand the need for promotion and you'll separate yourself from the "wannabes."
- Reality #3: She's human. The fact that real, live people are manning publishing's gates is generally a blessing. Sometimes, though, human frailties can cause misunderstanding, miscommunication and frustration. Maybe your manuscript reached an editor on a day where her mind was otherwise occupied; maybe she has a personal distaste for the subject matter of your manuscript; maybe she has a jerk of an ex-husband who came from Kentucky, and thus holds a grudge against all Kentuckians. Who knows? Success Strategy: If you've gotten off on the wrong foot with an editor, don't take it personally. You can try making contact with a polite card or email, but don't call or otherwise hound her. Don't bad-mouth her to your writer buddies. Don't complain to her higher-ups and don't obsess over it. Successful writers know not to take rejection personally, and understand the value of patience, decency and compassion when it comes to dealing with those brave and tireless souls who work to keep flesh, bones, brains and heart a part of the publishing equation.



So go ahead and celebrate our friend the editor. In so doing, you just might be helping your career more than you could ever imagine.

## Understand Rights

When you sell a manuscript, what you're actually doing is giving the publisher permission to license certain rights to your work. The publisher pays you for the use of these rights as long as the book is in print. Below are the most common rights you'll see in contracts from book and magazine publishers. For the sake of simplicity I've used "author" when referring to the creator of the work, but illustrators would also receive a contract covering the same rights.

- **Book Contracts:** The author grants the publisher the exclusive right to publish his book in a stipulated market (North American or world markets are the most common). Most contracts these days include both hardcover and paperback rights (which may be defined as trade paperback or mass market paperback). These are the primary rights you're licensing, from which most of your sales will come. Depending on the publisher, the author earns a royalty based either on the retail price or the net price of each book sold ("net price" is what the publisher actually gets for each copy after discounts given to book stores). Average royalties are 10% for hardcover books, and 6%-8% for paperback. Royalties are split between the author and illustrator.

The publisher may also license the right to distribute the American version of your book to foreign markets, and pay a reduced royalty on these sales. This is different from the translation rights described below.

- **Subsidiary rights:** These include book club rights; translation rights (foreign-language editions of your work); serial rights (selling excerpts of the work to magazines); and dramatic, television and motion picture rights (some publishers consider audio and video versions of a book to be under the heading of "Dramatic Rights," other contracts break them out separately). If the publisher licenses any of these rights to another company, the proceeds are split between the publisher, author and illustrator, generally with 50% going to the publisher, and 50% being divided proportionally between author and illustrator (if just the text is licensed, for ex-ample, the author would get the entire 50%).

Other subsidiary rights include display rights, or electronic publishing rights. Some-times called "data, storage and retrieval rights," this involves editions, as well as formats not yet developed. This is the one clause most authors and illustrators try to eliminate from their contracts, though many publishers won't budge. You can try to restrict the wording to only certain formats, or to only electronic formats designed to be read (which would eliminate a lot of interactive software).

If the publisher has its own electronic publishing division, there will be another clause under the general rights portion of the contract stating the author grants the publisher the right to produce its own electronic edition of the book. The author would then be paid royalties on each copy sold. This would also appear in the illustrator's contract.

- Special sales. Quantities of your book sold at a discount to organizations or retail outlets that don't normally sell books might fall under the "special sales" heading. Because the publisher sells these at a greater discount than to book stores, your royalty will be smaller.
- Magazine Contracts First rights. The magazine purchases the right to be the first one to publish the work. Sometimes called "first serial rights." "First North American serial rights" means the company is the first to publish the work in the US and Canada.
  - One-time rights. The magazine has the right to publish your work once, and then the rights revert back to the author or illustrator.
  - Second serial rights. Also called "reprint rights," this means the magazine is granted the right to publish a piece that's already appeared elsewhere.
  - All rights. When a magazine acquires all rights, it owns the work. The author or illustrator has no say in how often the work will appear, or who the magazine can license the work to for future publication. Sometimes authors and illustrators can negotiate a time limit on these rights, having them revert back to the creator after three or five years.

## Understand Royalties Versus Flat Fees

If you study the publisher listings in *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market* (Writer's Digest Books), you'll notice under "Terms" that some publishers pay an advance and royalty, and some a flat fee. Before discussing which one is a better deal for the author, let's take a look at what each payment method means:

### **Advance and Royalty**

If an author earns royalties, she gets a percentage of the price of each book sold. Traditionally, this percentage was based on the retail price (or cover price) of the book, but some publishers are now paying royalties based on the net price, which is the money the publisher actually receives (book stores purchase stock at a discount--ranging from 40%-50%--and the royalty would be figured on this discounted price). The publisher pays the author an advance against future royalties. The advance is typically paid in two installments; half on the signing of the contract, half on the delivery of a completed, satisfactory manuscript. The author receives no royalty payments until the advance has earned out. So, if you received a \$2000 advance on a 10% royalty rate and your book sells for \$10, you'd have to sell 2000 copies of your book before seeing any royalty checks. If the advance never earns out, the author does not have to return any money to the publisher. Common royalty rates are 10% for hardcover books (if the author and illustrator are different people with a hardcover picture book, they split the royalty and each get 5%); 6%-8% on paperbacks (with the author and illustrator splitting evenly for picture books). .

Pros: The more your book sells, the more money you make. This can be great incentive for promoting your work through school visits, book signings, and trade shows.

Cons: If your advance never earns out, your publisher loses money, lessening the chance of that house wanting to publish another book.

## **Flat Fee**

A flat fee payment (sometimes called work-for-hire or outright purchase) means the author is paid one lump sum for the work and never earns royalties. The payment is generally made half on signing of the contract, half on delivery of the finished work. Magazines always pay with a flat fee, either on acceptance or upon publication.

Pros: You get the whole payment by the time you've finished writing the book, without waiting months or years to see royalty checks.

Cons: If the book sells well, you might not make as much money overall as with a royalty agreement. If the publisher still expects you to spend time promoting the book, you'll be doing that extra work for the publisher, not yourself. Some publishers issues work-for-hire agreements because they want to retain copyright of the text and illustrations. This means the publisher, not you, owns the work, and (depending on your contract) can resell it without paying you additional money.

## **The Bottom Line**

Very often, the choice between receiving a royalty or a flat fee is not up to you. Publishers generally have standard policies in place, and a beginning author or illustrator has little room to negotiate. You're rarely able to change whether royalties are figured on the retail or net price. However, if you're offered a flat fee of \$3500 for a paperback easy reader text, you could counter by asking for a \$2000 advance and 6% royalties. But do some investigating first and see if you can find out how well this easy reader series has been selling (talk to sales clerks in book stores and even your librarian to determine if these books are generally known by young readers). Be willing to take the long-term risk if you choose the royalty route.

You can always ask for more money, whether it's a higher advance or a larger flat fee. Editors expect you to counter with another figure that's within reason. Asking for 10%-15% more is not unreasonable.

Some publishers offer flat fees for a reason, particularly if you're writing for a series that includes books by several authors (flat fees keep the accounting simpler). With series writing, publishers often want to retain copyright of each book so they have control over the entire series. If you're writing one of these books, chances are if you kept ownership of your material you wouldn't be able to resell the work anyway because it couldn't stand alone as a single title. However, if you've created a single book that's not connected to a series, retaining the copyright is a bigger issue. Don't be afraid to ask that the book be copyright in your name if it's not specified this way on the contract. In the end, only you know which type of agreement will feel satisfactory. Weigh your options, understand exactly what you're signing, and be willing to walk away if you're not happy.

## Understand the Genres of Children's Literature

I just received a letter from a writer who said, "Alas, I find myself adrift in a sea of unexplained and/or contradictory publishing terms." It's true -- you can read three different books on writing and find three different definitions of "picture book." So, to make your life easier, here's what I hope is a definitive glossary of children's publishing genres:

### **Picture Books:**

In its broadest definition, a picture book is a book in which the illustrations play a significant role in telling the story. Under this umbrella are several types of books:

1. Baby Books -- For infants and young toddlers, these books are generally lullabies, nursery rhymes, fingerplays, or wordless books. The length and format varies with the content.
2. Toddler books -- Very simple stories for ages 1-3 (under 300 words) familiar to a child's everyday life, or concept books (teaching colors, numbers, shapes, etc.) Books are short (12 pages is average) and the format can be board books (sturdy paper-over board construction), pop-ups, lift-the flaps or novelty books (books that make sounds, have different textures, etc.) See the "Max" series of board books by Rosemary Wells (Dial).
3. Picture books -- Traditionally, picture books (also called "picture story books") are 32-page books for ages 4-8 (this age may vary slightly by publisher). Manuscripts are up to 1500 words, with 1000 words being the average length. Plots are simple (no sub-plots or complicated twists) with one main character who embodies the child's emotions, concerns and viewpoint. The illustrations (on every page or every other page) play as great a role as the text in telling the story. Occasionally a picture book will exceed 1500 words; this is usually geared toward the upper end of the age spectrum. Picture books cover a wide range of topics and styles. The list of Caldecott Medal winners, available from your library, is a good place to start your research. Nonfiction in the picture

book format can go up to age 10, 48 pages in length, or up to about 2000 words of text.

4. Early picture books -- A term for picture books geared toward the lower end of the 4-8 age range. These stories are simple and contain under 1000 words. Many early picture books have been reprinted in the board book format, thus widening the audience. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle (Philomel) is an example.

### **Easy Readers:**

Also called "easy-to-read", these books are for children just starting to read on their own (age 6-8). They have color illustrations on every page like a picture book, but the format is more "grown-up" -- smaller trim size, sometimes broken into short chapters. The length varies greatly by publisher; the books can be 32-64 pages long, with 200-1500 words of text, occasionally going up to 2000 words. The stories are told mainly through action and dialogue, in grammatically simple sentences (one idea per sentence). Books average 2-5 sentences per page. See the "Amelia Bedelia" books by Peggy Parish or other "I Can Read" books published by Harper Trophy.

### **Transition Books:**

Sometimes called "early chapter books" for ages 6-9, they bridge the gap between easy readers and chapter books. Written like easy readers in style, transition books are longer (manuscripts are about 30 pages long, broken into 2-3 page chapters), books have a smaller trim size with black-and-white illustrations every few pages. See "The Kids of the Polk Street School" series by Patricia Reilly Giff (Dell) or the "Stepping Stone Books" published by Random House.

### **Chapter Books:**

For ages 7-10, these books are 45-60 manuscript pages long, broken into 3-4 page chapters. Stories are meatier than transition books, though still contain a lot of action. The sentences can be a bit more complex, but paragraphs are still short (2-4 sentences



is average). Chapters often end in the middle of a scene to keep the reader turning the pages. Look at the "Herbie Jones" books by Suzy Kline (Puffin) and the "Ramona" books by Beverly Cleary (Morrow).

### **Middle Grade:**

This is the golden age of reading for many children, ages 8-12. Manuscripts suddenly get longer (100-150 pages), stories more complex (sub-plots involving secondary characters are woven through the story) and themes more sophisticated. Kids get hooked on characters at this age, which explains the popularity of series with 20 or more books involving the same cast. Fiction genres range from contemporary to historical to science fiction/fantasy; nonfiction includes biographies, science, history and multicultural topics. Check out some middle grade novels from the list of Newbery Medal winners at your library to get you started.

### **Young adult:**

For ages 12 and up, these manuscripts are 130 to about 200 pages long. Plots can be complex with several major characters, though one character should emerge as the focus of the book. Themes should be relevant to the problems and struggles of today's teenagers, regardless of the genre. *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton defined young adult when it was first published in 1967; the Newbery Medal award list also contains many worthy titles. A new age category (10-14) is emerging, especially with young adult nonfiction. These books are slightly shorter than the 12 and up category, and topics (both fiction and nonfiction) are appropriate for children who have outgrown middle grade but aren't yet ready for the themes (fiction) or who aren't studying the subjects (nonfiction) of high school readers.

## Understand What an Agent Does

Whenever a group of beginning writers gets together, the question of "Do I need an agent?" invariably comes up. And the simple answer is no, you don't. Many authors sell their first book without an agent, and value the experience of writing query letters, researching publishers and negotiating their contracts. Acting as your own agent will give you an education in the business side of publishing and help you understand why some books sell and others don't.

But if you've decided you'd like an agent, finding one is much the same as finding a publisher. You need to research the possibilities, submit to agents who are taking new clients and who represent work similar to yours, and then wait for an offer of representation or a rejection. Since agents, like editors, have personal tastes, the "fit" is important. The best way to find an agent? By talking to other writers at writing conferences and on children's writing message boards (see the CBI message board at [www.Write4Kids.com](http://www.Write4Kids.com)), and hearing agents speak at writing events. You can also find lists of agents in the *Guide to Literary Agents* from Writer's Digest Books. Take a look at other books the agent has represented (listed in the Guide) to judge if this agent might successfully add you to her client base.

### **What an agent can do for you:**

An agent won't make you a better writer, but a good agent should give you general editorial direction so your manuscript is as strong as possible before being sent to an editor ("I feel the main character's conflict in your second picture book isn't as clearly defined as it could be. Try revising it again.") Some agents charge hefty editing or "reading" fees that include editorial critiques. Read the fine print before paying for such services. While the editing advice might be valid, there is generally no guarantee of representation even if the manuscript is revised according to the critique.

An agent will submit your work to targeted editors, negotiate the publishing contract, possibly retain some subsidiary rights (selling the work to book clubs, foreign publishers, etc.) to sell on your behalf (allowing you to keep more of the money from these sales than if the publisher sold them for you), keep track of deadlines and royalty statements, and generally act as go-between for you and the editor on business

issues. This allows the writer and editor to keep their relationship focused on the writing of the book. An agent might also work with the publisher's publicity department on coordinating book signings and other author appearances. For her work, the agent is paid a 15% commission on domestic rights sales, and a 20% commission on foreign rights sales of the work. The agent draws a commission on any money the book earns for as long as it's in print.

### **Other costs:**

Most agents bill clients for certain expenses incurred from submitting their work to publishers, such as photocopying, overseas postage or long distance phone calls. These expenses are standard and vary slightly by agent. Some agents expect their clients to reimburse expenses on a regular basis, others deduct the expenses from the advance once the book is sold.

I've recently heard of some agents charging a per-submission fee; in other words, for a certain amount up front, the agent will make a specific number of submissions to publishers. While this isn't illegal, in my opinion it eliminates the agent's motivation for trying to sell your work. A good agent will only take on manuscripts he's confident he can place with a publisher, since if the author doesn't make any money, neither does the agent. If the agent is being paid regardless of whether the manuscript sells, there's less motivation to actually try to match that manuscript with an appropriate editor.

### **The bottom line:**

Be sure to sign a contract with any agent which spells out the services the agent will provide, the commission rate, and any expenses you're expected to reimburse. Ideally, the contract should have a termination clause allowing either party to dissolve the agreement with 60 days written notice to the other. And remember: the agent is working for you, so take your time and carefully choose the person who will be representing your work to potential editors. A good agent can be the one constant ally in your career, seeing you from first-time writer to established professional.

## Write a Nonfiction Query Letter

The query letter can be the single most important element in selling your nonfiction book or article to a publisher. If you get an editor's go-ahead on your project before you write it, you avoid pouring your heart and soul into something that's going to be rejected. But a nonfiction query can serve double duty; it can also help you organize your thoughts, focus your research, and determine if your idea is even worth writing about.

When writing a nonfiction query letter, the first sentence should give the gist of the article or book. It must be strong and creative to pique the editor's interest in your idea. The opening sentence is really an advertisement for your writing style—it gives the editor a sense of how you write and the tone your work will take. So before you begin your query letter, you need to know if your writing will be humorous or serious, the age group you're targeting, and if you're gearing the piece to a scholarly publication or one with a hip, modern sensibility.

The rest of the first paragraph briefly answers the five basic questions about your topic: who, what, when, where and why. This forces you to convince the editor that your topic is worth writing about, and that you have a slant that will fit the magazine's focus or a book publisher's current needs. You're introducing the subject here, explaining how and why it's relevant to readers. This is a good place to cite some interesting statistics about your topic, so add that to your research before sending in the final query.

The second paragraph acts as a mini outline for your article or book. Good quotes or inside information should be mentioned in this paragraph. Editors like primary sources, so line up an interview with an expert on the topic or dig through library archives to find diary entries or letters on a historical event. Any outstanding photographs you find that can be licensed to go along with the text should also be mentioned.

The third paragraph covers the market for your topic. Before you write this paragraph, you'll have to research the competition. Are there already books out there on the same subject for the same age group? If so, how will yours be different? Have you read at

least two years' worth of the magazine's back issues to confirm they haven't just run a piece on this same subject? Then explain to the editor why there is a hole in the market that your book or article will fill.

In the final paragraph, introduce yourself to the editor. Mention your publishing credits, expertise in the area of your topic, organizations to which you belong. Anything that will lend you credibility as an author, including work experience or education, is important. If you don't have any relevant experience, just skip this paragraph.

Try writing a first draft query letter (that will never be sent to an editor) to organize your ideas and focus your research. Then, research both your topic and potential publishers. Once you know exactly what information you have and the age group for which you want to write, create your final query letter. Your query should be customized to each magazine or book publisher. Magazine writer's guidelines will tell you how long articles can be, the age range and reading level of the audience, and if they want a bibliography of resources included with the query. Many magazines have theme lists, so articles have to fit in with upcoming themes. Queries to book publishers should state how the book complements the publisher's existing list, or how it works with an ongoing series. Don't be afraid to tweak your tone or focus the information differently with each query until you find a perfect fit.

## Write a Synopsis

If a manuscript is longer than a picture book or easy reader, most publishers prefer to see a query letter and plot synopsis with sample chapters rather than the entire work. This speeds up the submissions process, and saves you from having to print out the whole manuscript for each publisher. After reading your query, the publisher will then request to see the entire work if interested.

The query letter has basically the same format as the cover letter. The first paragraph simply states what you are sending and the intended age group: "Enclosed are the first three chapters of my historical novel entitled *The Long Winter*, for children ages 8-12. The entire manuscript runs 87 pages."

If your novel is short (up to 75 pages) or has a straightforward, uncomplicated plot, you can then use the next two paragraphs to give a synopsis. The synopsis should mention the main characters, the story's plot and subplots, and how the conflict is resolved. You don't have to go into great detail, but include enough information so the editor will get a good sense of what type of story you've written and the story's themes. Don't use up space in the synopsis explaining the theme (the message of the book, or what your main character learns), but rather, outline the plot (the events in the book). The theme should be evident to the editor by what happens in the story, and therefore should be evident to your readers as well. If you painstakingly detail your theme in the cover letter ("In my story, children will learn that it's important not to give in to peer pressure"), the editor will feel (and rightly so) that the story itself isn't doing its job.

If you have a longer novel, or an intricate storyline, you can write the synopsis on a separate page. Try to keep it to three paragraphs, and in no case should the synopsis go over one page in length. Follow the same rules as above.

Many people have trouble writing synopses. They spend too much time detailing the characters (what they look like, which subjects they prefer in school, etc.) and not enough time on the story. If you have this problem, try this: Using a tape recorder, talk about your story out loud as if you're telling a friend about your manuscript. Restrict yourself to five minutes. After transcribing your words, cut the description by at least a third. Then do it again, this time limiting yourself to three minutes. Spend

one minute on the characters, one on plot and one on the conflict. This should help you pare down the key elements of your book to three brief paragraphs. After transcribing your second effort, rewrite the synopsis so the events flow in the same order as in your story.

After the synopsis, the next paragraph of your query letter would state any publishing experience and/or work you've done that's relevant to the story. Don't list marketing plans for the book, or say why the publisher should buy your manuscript (that's the editor's job). The final paragraph would simply read: "I have enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelope for your reply. I look forward to hearing from you."

Attach the first three chapters of your novel, and address both the letter and package to a specific editor if you have one in mind, or simply to "Submissions Editor."

## Write a Winning Query Letter

Many publishers, tired of being buried under mountains of unsolicited submissions, are now accepting only query letters from new authors. A query briefly describes your project and asks the editor for permission to send the entire manuscript. Always try to fit the entire letter on one page--only complex middle grade or young adult books may need an additional half page or so. Since the query is your only shot to impress the editor, writing this letter takes as much care as writing your book. Here are some tips:

- Make your pitch. Begin with a synopsis of your book. For fiction, this includes your main character; his problem, conflict or goal; the setting and time period (if it's other than the present); the main steps he takes to solve the story problem (note failures as well as successes); and how the character ultimately resolves the conflict at the plot's climax. For picture books, easy readers and young chapter books, this synopsis should be one paragraph. Longer novels may require two or three paragraphs. Concentrate on the plot (action) of the story, rather than the theme (message, or what the character learns). The editor needs a good sense of what happens in the book so she can determine if it's the type of story she'd be interested in reading.
- For nonfiction, open with a "hook"--one sentence that captures the focus of your book, or the particular slant you're taking on the topic. Some authors write the hook as a question (Have you ever told your dog a joke and seen him smile at the punch line? might begin a synopsis for a book about how kids communicate with their pets). Then follow with a brief description of the scope of your information, using your Table of Contents as an outline.

The synopsis for any book should be written in the same tone as the book itself. If your story is funny, the synopsis should be lighthearted. For scholarly nonfiction, the synopsis will focus on the facts and seriousness of the subject. Think of the synopsis as the copy that appears on the inside jacket flap of hardcover books. The potential customer has to be able to read this flap copy and get a good enough sense of the book to know if he wants to buy it.



- List the statistics. After the synopsis, use one paragraph to state the book's title, word count, and age of the intended audience. Also mention why you're sending a query to this particular editor. Your rationale may be general-- you admire the publisher's list and feel their illustrators would do a good job with your picture book--or more specific (After studying a number of titles in your "Step into Reading" series, I feel this story would fit well with other Level 2 books in the program.) If you're writing for a nonfiction series, tell the editor how your book follows the established series format and complements existing titles.
- For nonfiction books, it's a good idea to also mention how your book is different from other titles on the market on the same subject and for the same age group.
- Introduce yourself. List any previous publishing credits, memberships to writing organizations, and courses you've taken on writing for children. If you're a rank beginner, don't apologize. Just leave this paragraph out. If you've uncovered some interesting resources or have access to new information that's being used in your book, mention it here.
- Ask to submit. Finally, ask permission to send the whole manuscript (My I submit *A Dog for Jeremy* for your consideration?). Thank the editor for her time, and enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope for her reply.

Some publishers allow two sample chapters (fiction) or a Table of Contents and sample chapter (nonfiction) to accompany the query. Be sure to send only what's specified in the publisher's guidelines, which can often be obtained on publishers' web sites or by sending a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the editorial department.

For more information, including a collection of actual query letters written by top authors, see *Author To Editor*, available at <http://write4kids.com/a2e.html>

## Write for a Book Packager

In today's competitive market, it can be difficult for beginners to break into publishing with mainstream trade fiction or nonfiction. One way to increase your chances is to acquire some publishing credits in areas less overrun with submissions. In January, we discussed writing short "filler" pieces for magazines. Last month we explored different types of magazine nonfiction. In this issue, we'll take a look at book packagers.

Book packagers (sometimes called "book producers") oversee every phase of the book production process. They'll conceive of an idea for a book or series, hire the writers and illustrators, edit the work and either complete the design and layout or print the finished books. The packager sells the final product to a publisher, who markets the books as its own. The books may bear the publisher's name on their spines (as opposed to the name of the packager), but usually have the packager's name on the copyright page. Many publishers rely on packagers to produce their series, freeing editors to work on other books.

Like publishers, packagers specialize in different types of books. Some do only mass market series, others concentrate on educational nonfiction. Because packagers deliver a steady stream of books at regular intervals, they are always looking for new authors who can meet deadlines. If you're an unpublished writer, start with the smaller packagers. Well-known companies like Parachute Press (who produced R.L. Stine's Goosebumps series) and 17th Street Productions (known for the Sweet Valley High series, among others), already have a stable of experienced authors. It's easier to break in with a company open to newcomers.

If you're working with a packager on an ongoing series, chances are you'll be asked to write new books centered around existing characters, and possibly with an established plot line. Nonfiction series will have strict guidelines as to the length, content and presentation of information. Series authors must conform their writing style to that of the series. They must also write quickly and deliver work on time. Editors strive to keep the series uniform, so authors must also be able to take editorial direction and make changes as requested. Those that can will be given a steady stream of assignments.

Some packagers are looking for original ideas for single titles, or for series. Others want writing samples from prospective authors to be kept on file for future work. Be sure to study each packager's guidelines carefully before submitting, so you'll be sending the editor exactly what he or she needs. However, even if you dream of authoring a series of your own, consider first applying to write one or two books for an existing series. Editors are more likely to buy a five-book series from an author whose work they already know.

Packagers can offer new writers an excellent opportunity to learn the fundamental aspects of the publishing process, and can generate repeat assignments once a relationship with an editor is established. Many authors spend the bulk of their career writing for packagers. But there are some drawbacks. Series ideas are often conceived by the packager, who then hires writers to bring the series to life. Some authors find it confining to write within strict plot and character guidelines. Many ongoing series are written by several authors, but only one name appears on the book (the name of the series creator, or a pseudonym). Finally, the packager generally retains copyright (this happens most often with series, but can occur with single titles as well).

Authors are paid either with a onetime, flat fee, or with an advance and royalty. If you create a series for a packager and other authors are hired to write some of the books, you may still receive a royalty on each book sold, with the other authors receiving a flat fee. Each packager operates a little differently, so be sure you understand the payment and copyright specifications before signing any agreements.

Even if your name doesn't appear on the book, writing for a packager is a legitimate, respected publishing credit. If you write for a popular series, it will be much easier to sell your novel to a publisher (especially the publisher who markets the packaged series). And the lessons you'll learn on meeting deadlines, plotting, adhering to word counts and experimenting with different voices will benefit everything you write.

## FURTHER READING

- ❁ *Children's Book Insider, the Newsletter for Children's Writers*  
<http://write4kids.com/aboutcbi.html>
  
- ❁ *Author to Editor, Query Letter Secrets of the Pros*, by Linda Arms White  
<http://write4kids.com/a2e.html>
  
- ❁ *Complete Idiot's Guide to Publishing Children's Books*, by Harold Underdown  
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0028639758/ref=nosim/childrensbookinsA>
  
- ❁ *How to Write a Children's Book and Get It Published*, by Barbara Seuling  
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0684193434/ref=nosim/childrensbookinsA>
  
- ❁ *Childrens Writer's & Illustrator's Market*. An essential annual directory of children's publishers.  
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1582970742/ref=nosim/childrensbookinsA>
  
- ❁ *Writer's & Illustrator's Guide to Children's Book Publishers and Agents*, by Ellen Shapiro. An excellent guide!  
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0761525157/ref=nosim/childrensbookinsA>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Laura Backes has been part of the children's book publishing field since 1986. She's worked at some of New York's top publishing houses in publicity (Ballantine Books) and subsidiary rights (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), as a literary agent (Goodman Associates and later with The Backes Agency), and as a freelance editor for small presses and self-published authors. Since 1990 Laura has helped educate countless aspiring authors on the craft of writing for children through the pages of *Children's Book Insider, The Newsletter for Children's Writers*, which she publishes (see <http://www.write4kids.com> for more information).

In October 2000, Laura formed **Children's Authors' Bootcamp**, an intensive two-day workshop on writing fiction for children, which she teaches throughout the country with author Linda Arms White (see <http://www.wemakewriters.com> for more information).

Laura is also the author of *Best Books for Kids Who (Think They) Hate to Read* from Prima Publishing/Random House.