

Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly  October 2020

Writing Nonfiction for the Education Market



**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE
SUBMISSION CODE:**



**beaming
books**

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At Presstime:

Penguin Random House Imprint Accepting Submissions

Kokila Books is an imprint of Penguin Random House that publishes books for children and young adults across all formats and genres that celebrate the richness of our world. Looking for books that inspire and entertain readers and add nuance and depth to the way children and teens see the world and their place in it. Kokila is looking for (but not limited to) stories from communities of color, stories from people with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ stories, and stories about immigration. For a full list of Kokila's titles, go to penguin.com/publishers/kokila/.

Kokila is open to submissions until December 1, 2020. Submissions can be fiction or nonfiction, board books through young adult, as well as graphic novels. Send a query letter in the body of an email with a synopsis, brief author bio, and why this manuscript fits Kokila's mission. Attach the full manuscript as a doc file up to 20 MB. If you are an author/illustrator, send a full sketch dummy as a PDF with text placed on the pages, and two pieces of finished art. Illustrators may send three pieces of finished art and a link to an online portfolio in the body of your email. Only one submission per author or illustrator. Subject line format for authors: PB/MG/YA/GN: TITLE by AUTHOR. (Choose PB for picture book, MG for middle grade, YA for young adult, or GN for graphic novel.) Subject line format for illustrators: ILLUSTRATOR PORTFOLIO: NAME + LOCATION. All submissions should be addressed to kokila@penguinrandomhouse.com. Responds to submissions within a year.

Magazine Seeks Articles for Ages 8-10

Fun For Kidz is a magazine for boys and girls ages 6-13, with ages 8-10 being the target market. It's published 6 times a year. Fun For Kidz publishes articles and activities that deal with timeless topics, such as pets, nature, hobbies, science, games, sports, careers, and anything else likely to interest a child. Each issue revolves around a theme.

Looking for lively writing that involves an activity that is both wholesome and unusual. The Ideal length of a FUN FOR KIDZ nonfiction piece is up to 300-325 words for a one-page magazine article or up to 600-650 words for a two-page magazine article. Especially looking for entertaining, informative nonfiction involving kids ages 6 and older. Nonfiction submissions should be accompanied by sharp, high-resolution photos (at least 950 pixels wide, at least 260 dpi) that support the article. It is better to submit several photos rather than just one or two. Photos should be in color.

Pays a minimum of five cents a word for both fiction and nonfiction, with additional payment given if the piece is accompanied by appropriate photos or art. Payment is \$5 per photo. Buys first American serial rights and pays upon publication. Sample copies may be purchased online at funforkidz.com

Submissions accepted by mail only. Submissions should be typed, double-spaced, with your name and all contact info (including email and phone) on each page of the manuscript. Include a self-addressed, stamped envelope for the acceptance or rejection letter. Include a short cover letter and send the entire manuscript to Fun For Kidz Magazine, ATTN: Submissions, PO Box 227, Bluffton, OH 45817-0227. Simultaneous submissions are accepted if noted on the cover letter.

Upcoming themes (with issue): Words & Letters (January 2021), Birds of Prey (March 2021), Summer Money (May 2021), Water Creatures (July 2021), Helping Others (September 2021), Down Under (November 2021).

Website Helps Self-Published Authors Find Illustrators

Kindrling is a new Berlin-based platform that allows self-published authors and art directors to easily compare professional children's book illustrators by type of service, location and rating. Users can view the portfolio services of illustrators from around the world alongside price information (illustrators set their own prices). Illustrators are vetted by Kindrling and clients can leave reviews for everyone to see. All payments to the illustrator go through Kindrling's secure platform, and payments are made in increments as work is delivered. There is no fee to the author for using this service (Kindrling charges the illustrator 7% of the illustration fee to host the service and process the payments). For more information, go to kindrling.com. Illustrators can use this same link to learn how to join and showcase their work (click on the How It Works tab on the home page). Any questions can be directed to Julian at julian@kindrling.com

Publisher Seeking Teen Fiction with Romance Elements

Entangled Teen is an imprint of Entangled Publishing and features single-title young adult romance novels published in both digital and print. Seeking fresh voices with interesting twists on popular genres. All stories should have a romance element, but can be in any of the following subgenres of romantic fiction: Contemporary, Science Fiction, Paranormal, Fantasy, Historical, Romantic Suspense and Thrillers.

Looking for high-concept plots with romantic elements. Protagonists should be 16-19 years old. Manuscripts should be 70k to 120k words in length for all genres, except contemporary romance, which should remain under 90k. M/F, M/M, F/F relationships and multicultural characters are welcome!. Accepts both agented and unagented submissions. Submit through Submittable at entangledpublishing.submittable.com/submit/19015/entangled-teen

Award-winning Independent Publisher Accepting Submissions

Sleeping Bear Press publishes award-winning fiction and nonfiction picture books, beginning readers, chapter books and middle grade. Accepting submissions for all age groups. Please take a look at the Sleeping Bear Press catalog before submitting to see if your work fits (go to <https://sleepingbearpress.com/downloads> to download the current catalog). Email submissions only. The subject line of your email should include "New Submission", the title of your work, fiction/nonfiction, and the subject (science, nature, humor, etc.). The body of your email should be your cover letter and include: your full name, your postal address, any previous publishing experience, word count, and a brief summary of your manuscript. Attach your manuscript as a word document and send to submissions@sleepingbearpress.com. Responds within six months if interested.

We Need Diverse Books Author Mentor Program Open to Applications for 2021

We Need Diverse Books is offering 15 mentorships in 2021 to 12 aspiring authors and three illustrators (or author/illustrators). Mentors (experienced children's book creators) work one-on-one with a mentee and their completed draft of a manuscript over the course of a year, offering support to improve craft and to better understand the publishing industry. Mentorships are available to diverse writers OR any writers or illustrators who have completed a full draft of a manuscript for children or teens featuring a diverse main character or diverse central subject matter. The illustration mentorship is available to any diverse illustrator who has a portfolio and several sample illustrations completed. **Applications for the 2021 cycle will be open until October 31, 2020.** For more information and an application form, go to diversebooks.org/our-programs/mentorships/

Writing Nonfiction for the Education Market

PART 1: GETTING STARTED

by Kimberly M. Hutmacher

Writers of nonfiction often work for two different markets: trade publishers (which distribute to bookstores, as well as libraries and sometimes schools), or educational publishers (which focus on school and library sales). Both can be creatively satisfying, but use different routes to getting your work in print.

For a trade publisher, you'll first come up with a topic you love. You choose the age range for your book, determine the tone and how to approach the topic. After completing the research, you'll either write up a proposal (for longer works) or the manuscript (for picture books), and submit to either an agent or publisher. Finally, you'll begin the waiting game and hope that your manuscript gets picked up. If your trade book is acquired, you'll probably be offered an advance and a percentage of future royalties. You'll most likely be expected to help with marketing and promoting the book. Anyone wanting to buy your book will find it in bookstores and online, and it may also be available from public and school libraries.

Writing nonfiction for the education market is a bit of a different journey. Instead of submitting a manuscript or a proposal to a publisher, you submit a cover letter, resume and a few unedited writing samples. Then, if the publisher feels you're a good fit, they will offer you the opportunity to write one or more books in a new nonfiction series that they are creating, or for a new title in an existing series. The publisher chooses the topic, tone, age range and angle, and you write the book according to their specifications. These books always tie into the school curriculum. When the final draft of the book is accepted, you will be paid a flat fee for writing the book with no future royalties. You would not be expected to help with any future marketing or promotion. The publisher will sell your book as part of the series to school and public libraries, and make it available online.

Another difference between the two markets is that after your first trade nonfiction book is published, you have to come up with a new idea and start the process over (though you will have a connection with an editor that makes the submission process shorter). If an educational publisher likes working with you, you may be offered new assignments soon after completing your first book, giving you a steady stream of work.

SKILLS YOU'LL NEED TO WRITE FOR THE EDUCATION MARKET

This kind of writing requires some special skills. You must be curious. You never know what you might be assigned to write about, so natural curiosity and love of research is definitely required. You need to be able to break complicated concepts down into very simple and clear terms. These books often have to be written in a very short period of time. You have to be organized, work efficiently and be detail oriented. You must be able to follow directions well. These assignments usually come with an outline and guidelines which must be followed to a tee.

In some cases, you might be asked to write one or two books in a series where other books in the series have been written by another author. In this case, you need to be able to match the voice of the other author. These books are written at specific grade levels. Familiarity with reading levels is important. You will most likely be asked to do one or more revisions. You have to be open to revision requests. You must be able to work quickly. I've had anywhere from ten days to six weeks to complete a book, depending on length. If you think the timeline of a project will be a problem, address it with the publisher before you sign the contract. Sometimes there is some wiggle room and sometimes there isn't. Once the contract is signed, be prepared to meet your deadlines.

GETTING STARTED

The first thing you need to do is figure out if you even like these types of books. Take a trip to your local library and browse several different series by different publishers. Study how the books are constructed, the tone, and the different reading levels. If you are a member of SCBWI, you have access to their Education Press Market Survey. Visit those websites and study the books/series they have published. You can also find lists of educational publishers on author Evelyn B. Christensen's website at evelynchristensen.com/markets.html (use this list as a starting point for visiting publishers' websites and reading their books, but do check their current submission guidelines before submitting any work as they may have been updated). Another source is book packagers, who often produce nonfiction series for publishers. Packagers come up with the concept for the series, hire the writers, edit and produce the books, and then the publisher sells the series through their own sales department and website. The American Book Producers Association has a list of packagers here: abpaonline.org/wp-content/uploads/ABPA-MemberDirectory.pdf.

Educational publishers often set up booths at conferences. They use this opportunity to display many of the books in their catalogs. Attend educational conferences in your area and use this opportunity to study their books. If they appeal to you, then this might be a good fit for you, and you might be ready to proceed to the next step. A list of many annual conferences can be found here: resilienteducator.com/news/list-of-educational-conferences. (Note: While many in-person conferences have been cancelled for 2020, follow the conference websites for future in-person events.)

WRITING SAMPLES

I'm planning to delve more into what to submit in a packet to a publisher next month, but for now, you can get started on your writing samples. I normally submit two to three samples with each packet. Some publishers will specify a number in their guidelines. When writing these samples, think about what age group you would like to write for. If you want to stick with elementary school readers, you will submit samples showcasing your abilities to write for

different grade levels. I would include a Kindergarten-Grade 2 sample, a Grade 3-Grade 4 sample, and a Grade 5-Grade 6 sample. The next step is to get publisher specific. When preparing to write that K-2 sample, read other K-2 books that the publisher has done. You'll probably notice that many of their books have a similar length, tone, and structure. Look at sentence length, paragraph length, and how many words appear on each page. Look at the reading level of the vocabulary used. Are there any side bars? Study the voice and how the information is presented. Your original sample should mimic their length, tone, and style. You don't have to submit complete books in your samples, though a 150 word book for K-1 would be easy enough. You just need to submit enough to show them what you can do at each level. The sample portion of my packet is usually four to five pages.

Now you're off! Next month we'll dive into resumes, cover letters and market research.

HELPFUL RESOURCES:**Writing For The Education Market Blog**

<http://educationwriting.blogspot.com/>

**This blog hasn't been updated in quite sometime, but there is still quite a bit of good information in past posts.*

Writing Blueprints: The Children's Nonfiction Market: How To Break In and How To Succeed

<https://writingblueprints.com/p/the-childrens-nonfiction-market-how-to-break-in-how-to-succeed>

(The instructor, Lionel Bender, will be presenting another Writing Blueprints webinar on writing for the school and library market in late 2020, so keep an eye out for that announcement.)

Tips For Writing For The Education Market

www.evelynchristensen.com/markettips.html

Basics Of The Educational Market

<http://bit.ly/taralazareducationalmarket>

Writing For The Educational Market

<http://bit.ly/annettewhippleeducationalmarket>

JILL BRAITHWAITE, Editorial Director



interview by Lynne Marie

Jill Braithwaite is Editorial Director at 1517 Media for the Beaming Books imprint. She brings over 25 years experience in the publishing industry to that role, having worked at Capstone, Lerner, and Red Line Editorial. Jill leads the editorial team at Beaming Books, which publishes fiction and nonfiction books for ages 0-18 that help kids thrive socially, emotionally, and spiritually.

LYNNE MARIE: Please share a little about your background. What brought you this particular value-based branch of children's publishing?

JILL BRAITHWAITE: I've been involved in children's book publishing for about 25 years. I started at Lerner Publishing Group as a proofreader, then became an editor, and later a managing editor there. It was a wonderful place to learn the craft of making high-quality children's books of all kinds. Since then, I've worked in product development, marketing, and editorial roles at Capstone, Red Line Editorial, and Sparkhouse Family, which was the initial iteration of Beaming Books. I have always loved language and visual arts, and I adore the endless variety of ways that children's books bring them together. In the last 10 years or so, I've gotten increasingly interested in religion and spirituality, and in 2015 I finished a master's degree in theology and the arts. My thesis was about how literature can and should be a valuable source for theology and for spiritual development.

LM: So many are under the misconception because of the transition from the Sparkhouse Family label that Beaming Books is a religious publisher. How would you categorize the company? What percent of the books would you say are religious? What percentage value-based?

JB: Beaming Books is part of the 1517 Media family, and we are rooted in a progressive Christian tradition that is open-hearted and grace-based. Our theological tradition is about promoting authentic human thriving and the common good. Along with Broadleaf Books, our adult trade nonfiction imprint, our mission is to serve general readers with books that help people thrive in all kinds of ways. Beaming Books's particular focus is on social/emotional development, spiritual development, and self-empowerment. About two-thirds of our list is values-based and addresses themes for general readers. The other third is more explicitly religious, with books exploring prayer, God, and biblical themes.



LM: Apart from being a book that helps kids thrive, what are other things you look for in a book to represent the Beaming Books brand? Share five buzzwords that you feel describe the essence of this imprint.

JB: Surprise, delight, connectedness, sharpness, and heart. (By sharpness, I mean that a manuscript has concision and a clear purpose.)

LM: How would you recommend a writer to envision your target reader? What is your primary market for sales?

JB: Our target reader varies by book, but I'll say that we always aim for our books to delight and engage any young reader who encounters them.

Our books are available wherever books are sold. They appeal to readers in both retail and educational markets.

LM: As an editorial director you plan the releases for the imprint. How many times a year do you release

Jill Braithwaite continued

books? Approximately how many books do you release each season?

JB: We release books in two seasons, spring and fall. We're publishing about 12 books per season these days.

LM: When you plan for a particular season, do you look for seasonal tie-ins, for example, for a spring release, do you look to have a Mother's Day and Father's Day tie-in book, or do you not have boxes that you try to check with each seasonal list?

JB: We have had great success with Christmas and Easter titles, so we often plan for titles related to those holidays to release seasonally. With other titles, we'll tie their publication to relevant seasonal considerations, but we won't force it.

LM: Regarding values, I have found Beaming Books to be open and embracing of all the differences in people (race, culture, disability, sexuality), as long as the stories were value-based. Is there anything that might cross the line and be too hard to tackle, like perhaps other religions?

JB: Funny you should mention that, because we have been seeking books on interfaith themes and about other religions. Those subjects are definitely aligned with the open-hearted, common-good-focused theology behind our work. Watch for those kinds of books in the future.

LM: One of the books you recently edited was *The Girl with the Big, Big Questions* (by Britney Winn Lee, author of *The Boy with the Big, Big Feelings*). Please share a little bit about the process of editing that book, as well as why you choose that project.

JB: I love these two books and their emphasis on big things kids experience and the big challenges that come with them. Britney's first book with us, *Feelings*, is so relatable for so many kids—and for adults! It can be rough having strong feelings, for all of us. In *Questions*, Britney tells the story of a girl who keeps asking hard-to-answer questions and is worried that people are really uncomfortable with it. Kids have so many questions, including big, hard-to-answer ones about life. This book, which will publish in Fall 2021, gently encourages kids to keep asking questions, because learning is how we grow.

The book is in rhyming verse, so editing that is always

a balancing act between having content and meaning that you're seeking and also making sure the verse scans in a fun, pleasing way. And we also needed to show that the girl's questions become a problem for her in a believable way, and then also that she finds a creative way to make peace with her question-asking. Britney is a creative author whose writing has great energy and verve, and editing the book was a delight.

LM: As someone who gets to review the cream of the crop (those that rise to the top), what would be some of the most common reasons that a manuscript would not move forward?

JB: Sometimes a manuscript we love won't move forward because we simply can't tie it to our core mission well enough. Sometimes we find something that is on mission, but we let it go because the story is too expected, or its "problem" is solved too easily, or it doesn't feel new and special enough, or it's in rhyme that isn't very well done.

LM: How does what you are looking for in nonfiction differ from what you are looking for in fiction? Please explain.

JB: Nonfiction for children requires first a strong allegiance to the facts, or the foundational material, and to getting it right, to representing that foundation well and accurately. And it also requires creativity and clarity in its presentation. What does the author add to the foundational material? Is it context, clarity, freshness, a new perspective? Sharing information or retelling a Bible story, for example, must absolutely be faithful to the source material, but it must also engage children with good storytelling. In fiction, on the other hand, the writer's first loyalty is to creating a great story and to using all the tools at their disposal to do so.

LM: Focusing on formatting for a moment—how important is this to a submission? What do you feel about indenting paragraphs (or not), single or double-spacing, double spacing between scenes, page numbers and art notes? For picture books, do you recommend portraying line breaks as they would be in actuality?

JB: The first job of formatting in submissions is to not call attention to itself. We appreciate submissions that are in a highly readable font, such as boring old Times New Roman, and double-spaced. Paragraph indents are optional, depending on how long the manuscript is (yes for longer works). For picture books, I do like

Jill Braithwaite continued

to see an author's idea of where line breaks and page breaks should go, because that indicates their intended pacing.

LM: What is your feeling about art notes? Are they all right to include if essential to understanding the story?

JB: Picture book writers should definitely include art notes if they are crucial to understanding the story.

LM: Is there anything in particular on your wishlist for the imprint? Please share any details.

JB: In keeping with the Beaming Books mission, we're particularly interested in the following:

- Nonfiction with creative formats and approaches that engages kids in topics that help them gain deeper understanding of their world, their place in it, and how they can promote the common good.
- Nonfiction that centers marginalized stories.
- Nonfiction at all levels that supports kids in spiritual growth, in personal development, and in coping with challenges.
- Books by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) creators.
- All kinds of Christian topics and themes, with a progressive, contemporary approach. Examples include Jesus, God, biblical themes, prayer, ways we live our faith.
- Fictional picture books and chapter books that tell surprising stories, with themes that address values such as grit, teamwork, friendship, and loving our neighbor.

LM: Lastly, please share a book or two or three that you feel exemplifies your Beaming Book list and tell us why so that our readers may consider these and make more targeted submissions.

JB: I'll highlight two picture books that exemplify our list. One is *Little Mole Finds Hope* by Glenys Nellist. In this story a little mole is feeling sad in his burrow, and his mother shows him where to look for hope. He learns that hope can be found in even the darkest places. A story like this is lovely for anytime, since we all need reminding about how to find hope in darkness,

and the book is finding special resonance during the challenges of the global pandemic.

Another title is *The Boy with Big, Big Feelings*, which tells the story of a boy whose strong emotions are constantly bursting out of him. When he tries to stuff them down, he learns with the help of a new friend that those strong feelings are something to be celebrated. The story is told in rollicking verse with charmingly expressive illustrations, and it addresses a topic we all deal with in a fun, fresh way.

ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE

Beaming Books is not currently accepting unsolicited submissions, but Jill Braithwaite is offering CBI subscribers an exclusive **Above the Slushpile** opportunity for the month of October, 2020. CBI members may email one submission to submissions@beamingbooks.com, and put **CBI BEAMING: (Story Headline) by (Authors Name)** in the subject line. Include a query letter in the body of the email, and attach the entire manuscript for a picture book, or the first chapter for longer works, as a doc file. You will receive a response within three months if interested. **This Above the Slushpile code expires on October 31, 2020.**

Please Read Before You Proceed

Before you submit your manuscript using a CBI Above the Slushpile code, please run through the following checklist:

- You've studied the guidelines of the editor or agent to whom you'll be submitting, and verified that your manuscript falls within those guidelines.
- You've confirmed your work matches the interests of the editor/agent by reading their CBI interview, and studying recent books on their list or clients they represent.
- Your manuscript falls within standard word counts of the particular age group for which you're writing. (If you don't know standard word counts, get our free Ultimate Children's Writing Cheat Sheet at writeforkids.org/ultimate-cheatsheet)
- Your work has been critiqued by a beta reader, critique partner/group, or a freelance editor.
- You have thoroughly revised and polished your manuscript.
- Your submission packet matches what the editor or agent requests on their guidelines.
- The Above the Slushpile code you're using has NOT expired.

Thank you for following these guidelines and sending our generous editors and agents your best work! Good luck!

CHARACTER-DRIVEN VS PLOT-DRIVEN

KNOW THE DIFFERENCE

by Jane McBride

At some point during the development of a story, the arc of the book becomes either character-driven, or plot-driven. This is not always a conscious decision on the writer's part, but it should be. Whether your story relies most heavily on the evolution of a character, or the progression of a plot, will affect many decisions you make during the writing process. But first, you need to understand the difference between these two broad types of story development.

Character-driven stories allow the reader to deeply identify with the characters on an emotional level. Feelings and thoughts and reflections are given high priority. Themes like relationships, identity, coming of age, loss, finding purpose, or discovering one's core values are common in character-driven books. The plot is driven by what's important to the character, a goal the protagonist wants to achieve that will lead to a lasting change in his/her everyday life, and how the character is trying, failing, succeeding and evolving in pursuit of that goal. The character's actions and motivations steer the direction of the story. In other words, the specifics of the plot spring from who the character is, the changes she wants to make, and who she eventually becomes.

On the flip side, plot-driven stories will probably have fast-paced action with twists and turns that throw obstacles in the character's path and constantly raise the stakes. Readers get to know the characters by how they react to these obstacles and deal with the next challenge. A plot-driven book transforms the protagonist through external events. The character may become smarter, braver or more skilled by the end of the book, but it's because this character lived through intense moments of action, suspense, drama or mystery. Plot events provide the forward momentum of the story, and how the character reacts to these events leads to the next plot point. The character evolves because of the plot. If this character had not been dropped into this situation, he might not have changed.

Whole both types of books rely on a combination of plot and character development to create the story, a book will lean in one direction or the other. And depending on which way your book leans can affect how you write it.

Tips for Creating Character-Driven Stories

- If you're writing a character-driven book, you'll start by developing your protagonist and any important secondary characters in detail. Intimately knowing who your character is, her strengths and weaknesses, her goals and dreams, as well as her relationships with the most influential people in her life, will steer you in the direction of your plot.
- Know what's important to your character, what's causing her pain, and what she needs to change in order to alleviate the pain and take a step closer to becoming the person she wants to be. Think about how you can frame all these aspects of character in a way that will be meaningful and relatable to your readers.
- Your plot development will begin by asking, "What does my character want right now?" and "What's standing in his way?" The obstacles your character faces can (and should) be dramatic, and can come from inside your character (lack of self-confidence, a fear holding him back, lack of knowledge, etc.), as well as external forces (including obstacles presented by other characters). While external events may set your story in motion and throw roadblocks in your character's path, how he reacts to these events creates the next plot point.
- Once you've created your characters and developed your plot points, work on forging a connection between characters and readers by the use of first person or limited third person point of view. This means you're seeing the events through the eyes of your viewpoint character, and showing that character's thoughts and feelings, but not jumping into the heads of any other characters. Most often you will stay in the POV of your protagonist for the entire book. Some middle grade and young adult novels have two protagonists, and the POV may alternate by chapter, but the entire chapter should be written in one consistent viewpoint.
- Constantly go back to your character to create plot twists and tension. For example, if your middle grade or YA novel is written in alternating chapters between two main characters, write each chapter from the POV

Know the Difference continued

of the character who has the most to lose. Aren't certain which character has the most to lose? Ask yourself which character is most invested in what's happening during that chapter. If you have one viewpoint for the whole book, for each scene ask yourself, "How will the events in this scene change my character?" If your character is exactly the same at the end of the scene as at the beginning (didn't learn new information/didn't shift the dynamic of a relationship/didn't experience something new/didn't face a challenge and either fail or succeed) then the scene hasn't moved the story forward.

- Ask your character what he is afraid to reveal. Show this fear through the action in that scene or chapter. One way of doing this is to have the character act the opposite of what he is feeling. If he is hurting inside, perhaps he acts more jovially than normal. If he is afraid, maybe he shows off with misplaced bravado.
- Following the revelation of a secret, the character should change, as should his relationship to the character(s) to whom he has revealed the secret. The same is true whenever your protagonist learns some new truth about herself, or finally faces a fear. She changes, as do her relationships to any characters impacted by this new truth, and this change turns the plot in a new direction.
- A full and satisfying character arc is essential in character-driven stories. Your character must grow, change and learn because of the choices she's made when faced with the events in the plot. She needs to finish the story in a different internal place (such as mentally, emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, or have clarity about issues important to her), than she was at the beginning.

Tips for Creating Plot-Driven Stories

- You'll most likely begin developing this story by sketching out a plot (a mystery to solve, a villain to conquer, a life-and-death situation to survive) and then create the characters who will be placed into this situation. The characters need to have traits that logically connect them to this story, and also skills to help them succeed, and flaws that cause them problems. But their skills and flaws will be revealed because of the plot in which they are placed.
- Always raise the stakes. Make the character reach deep inside of himself for the courage, stamina, and strength to reach his goal.
- Make each obstacle the main character faces more dif-

ficult than the previous one. Imagine the readers' disappointment if the character reaches for his goal and achieves it upon his first try. He must keep striving, keep reaching until the goal is so close that he can almost touch it, and then it is snatched from his grasp. Be mean to your characters. Throw everything you can at them and then do it again and again.

- Make him/her take two steps back for every one step forward.
- Don't let up on what the protagonist is facing. If he is trying to rescue his sister from the clutches of an evil ogre, have the ogre grow another pair of arms when it appears that the main character is close to achieving his goal.
- Other characters in the book should all serve the plot. They may support the protagonist (and therefore have qualities that assist the main character), or work against the protagonist. Some characters do both, which helps create plot complications.
- Every scene moves the plot forward. Dialogue reveals both character dynamics and plot information. The setting is depicted by how your characters move through it or interact with it. Description for description's sake needs to be cut. If your protagonist is enjoying the sunset at the beach, the scene also needs to trigger a memory that reveals a clue to the mystery, or be interrupted by someone setting fire to a car in the parking lot.
- Character arcs do not have to be as complex in plot-driven books, though they can be. Often, the characters grow from simply living through the plot. Two characters bond over solving a mystery and become friends. A protagonist lives through a harrowing adventure and gains physical strength and self-confidence. Emotional growth does happen, but it's generally developed in a sub-plot, and then that growth helps the character deal with the main plot problem.
- Keep in mind the age of your audience. What a six-year-old character must overcome will differ from what a 16-year-old character must overcome. Keep the stakes in line with the character's and readers' ages.

More Points to Consider

Many books have a close balance of plot and character, making them hard to categorize. The key is your starting point. Do you start by envisioning your character, and then imagine what type of conflicts this character would have? You're probably writing a character-driven book,

Know the Difference continued

even if it's got a high-stakes plot. Another way of looking at your idea is asking, "Would this plot exist with any other character?" If you change key aspects of your character's makeup, would the plot arc completely crumble, or could another character with some similar skills step into the story? On the other hand, if your idea is sparked by an event, or an intriguing situation, or even a setting, you're probably writing a plot-driven book. The overall plot arc is what excites you, and then you create the characters who would most likely inhabit that world and be part of that storyline. Of course, your unique characters affect the trajectory of the plot, but they aren't the plot's starting point. The premise of the mystery, or natural disaster, or current event could still exist with another cast of characters, even if the details change.

If your idea isn't coming together, it could be that you're trying to write a plot-driven book about a character arc, and building the story from the action rather than who the character is. Or, perhaps you're intending to write a character-driven story but are letting the plot dictate what your character does, instead of allowing your character to show you where the plot needs to go. If that's the case, take a step back and try developing your idea differently.

Ultimately, your goal as a storyteller is to weave all the elements of your book together so seamlessly that your readers aren't aware of your starting point, but just lose themselves in the blend of your plot and characters, and can't imagine the story being written any other way.

Here's a list of character-driven and plot driven books:

Picture books, character-driven

Crown, An Ode to the Fresh Cut by Derrick Barnes, illus. by Gordon C. James

I Don't Want to Be a Frog! by Dev Petty, illus. by Mike Boldt

The Adventures of Beekle: The Unimaginary Friend by Dan Santat

Lubna and Pebble by Wendy Meddour, illus. by Daniel Egneus

The Most Magnificent Thing by Ashley Spires

The Day You Begin by Jacqueline Woodson, illus. by Rafael López

Picture books, plot-driven

Bear Came Along by Richard T. Morris, illus. by LeUyen Pham

They All Saw a Cat by Brendan Wenzel

Sam and Dave Dig a Hole by Mac Barnett, illus. Jon Klassen

Moldilocks and the Three Scares: A Zombie Tale by Lynne Marie, illustrated by David Rodriguez Lorenzo
Finding Winnie: The True Story of the World's Most Famous Bear by Lindsay Mattick, illustrated by Sophie Blackall

Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus! by Mo Willems

Longer books, character-driven

Amelia Bedelia easy reader series by Peggy Parish

Ivy and Bean chapter books (ages 7-10) by Annie Barrows

The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane by Kate DiCamillo (ages 7-10)

Charlotte's Web (ages 8-12) by EB White

Wonder by RJ Palacio (ages 8-12)

Pax (upper middle grade/YA) by Sarah Pennypacker

Everything, Everything by Nicola Yoon (YA)

Long Way Down by Jason Reynolds (YA, character and plot very closely connected here, and the character's moral dilemma is triggered by external events. But ultimately, the relationships between characters are paramount to steering the direction of the story.)

Longer books, plot-driven

Captain Underpants series of early chapter books by Dav Pilkey (ages 7-9)

The Time Warp Trio chapter books by Jon Scieszka (ages 7-10)

Series of Unfortunate Events series by Lemony Snicket (ages 8-12)

Diary of a Wimpy Kid series by Jeff Kinney (ages 8-12)

Chasing Vermeer by Blue Balliett (middle grade mystery)

The Uglies series by Scott Westerfeld (YA, dystopian)

The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas (this YA is very balanced between character and plot, but the protagonist is forced into her journey because of external events, so it tips slightly toward plot-driven)

Two Librarians Speak on What Kids are Reading Right Now

interview by Sharon O. Blumberg

If you want to know what type of books your target readers love, ask a librarian! Let's begin with Amanda Cawthon, Youth Services Librarian of Pflugerville Public Library in Pflugerville, Texas.



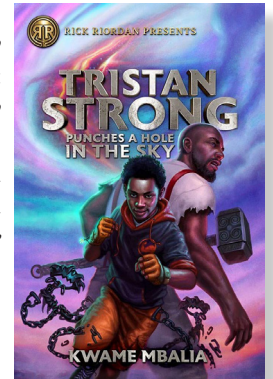
SHARON BLUMBERG: Please tell us a little bit about yourself. How did you acquire the title of Youth Services Librarian who helps children enhance their love of reading?

AMANDA CAWTHON: I grew up in Pflugerville and spent wonderful hours in the children's room of the library. This was back when it was located in a little house on 3rd street. I always loved reading, but didn't consider librarianship as a career until I was nearing college graduation when I saw a poster advertising careers in libraries. I started to look into the different types of careers available and realized that would be my dream job.

While I was working on my MLS, I worked as a copy cataloger at the Abilene Public Library. I was given the opportunity to observe and learn about children's services from their talented staff. After graduating, I was thrilled to return to my home town, where I was hired at Pflugerville Public Library. I worked in adult services. Eventually, I moved to youth services and have happily spent the past 8 years working to provide the best possible books, resources, and services to the children and teens in our community. There are many aspects to my job, but one of my favorite tasks is connecting children with books that they will love.

SB: How do you help children find books they like?

AC: I like to start out by finding out what books they have enjoyed in the past. But sometimes they have trouble thinking of a specific title because they haven't really fallen in love with any books yet. When that happens, I move on to their favorite movies, hobbies, or video games. If a kid loves superhero movies, I can find great options for them. For example, *The Cloak Society* by Jeramey Kraatz or *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky* by Kwame Mbalia. If they take ballet lessons, they may enjoy a biography about Misty Copeland or a picture book like *Flora and the Flamingo* by Molly Idle.



SB: What kinds of books are most popular for different age ranges?

AC: From beginning readers through teens, I think graphic novels may win out as the most popular format. There are so many great quality options available, as demonstrated by Jerry Craft who received the Newbery Medal for *New Kid*. There are so many genres and reading levels available in graphic novels. There is something to meet every interest and need. People used to think that comic books always equaled superheroes, but that's not the case. You can find everything in them... fantasy, mystery, historical fiction, realistic fiction, and nonfiction.

SB: Have you noticed any trends in reading habits?

AC: Although fantasy is a constant favorite for children, I've noticed books that make you laugh are in high demand at my library. Kids love the *Dork Diaries* series and *Dog Man*. Younger children are much more likely to absorb the lesson in a picture book. For example, *Please, Mr. Panda* by Steve Antony, which makes them laugh out loud.

Two Librarians... continued

SB: What age groups are attracted to illustrated books?

AC: I think that most children and young adults in every age group love and appreciate illustrated books. There has been a big trend in hybrid books for beginner readers. They combine text with picture book and graphic novel elements. I think that trend really took off with the popularity of Jeff Kinney and Dav Pilkey. Those books are a great bridge for children beginning to move beyond picture books, and with graphic novels, they encourage readers to build their visual literacy skills.

SB: Do you find that children are attracted to books their friends like?

AC: I think that popularity among friends and classmates can make a huge difference in bringing attention to a great book. I saw that play out when my son's first grade class discovered the *Dog Man* series by Dav Pilkey. Once one or two kids started reading them, it didn't take long for all of his friends to become obsessed. It was amazing to see how my son's reading interest and ability skyrocketed once he was introduced to *Dog Man* and *Cat Kid*. Even kids that don't see themselves as "readers" may be encouraged to try a book that all of their friends are reading and talking about.

SB: Are there holes in the market for the kinds of books that children are asking for?

AC: The biggest hole, a lack of diverse representation, is thankfully beginning to be filled. This isn't something that kids necessarily think to ask for, but it's something they notice and appreciate when it is available. Just a few years ago, it was a challenge to find many picture books featuring BIPOC main characters that were not historical fiction or about social issues. Now there are great titles available like *Mommy's Khimar* by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow and *The King of Kindergarten* by Derrick Barnes, that feature children in everyday situations. It is vital that all children have the opportunity to see themselves in the books they find at the library. I hope that publishers continue to recognize the importance of that representation and give more authors of color an opportunity to share their stories.

SB: What kinds of books are great read-alouds for storytimes?

AC: My favorite storytime read-alouds are books with well-done rhythm and rhyme like *Llama Llama Red Pajama* by Anna Dewdney or *Grandma's Tiny House* by JaNay Brown-Wood. They are so much fun for me to read, and when I am enjoying a read-aloud, the kids are automatically more engaged and focused on the story. I also love books like Eric Litwin's *Pete the Cat*. These books engage children in the reading, either through repetition or calls to action. And of course, books that make children and parents laugh are wonderful choices.



Now let's speak With Kristin Johnson, Children's Librarian of Wells Branch Community Library of Austin, Texas.



SHARON BLUMBERG: Please tell us a little bit about yourself, and how you came to be a librarian who helps children enhance their love of reading.

KRISTIN JOHNSON: My love of literature started when I was very young. I surrounded myself with books, and volunteered at my school library. I have always been an avid reader. I developed a passion for information organization and working with children, through college internships at the Austin Children's Museum, and at an elementary school library. I continued working at the Austin Children's Museum as a gallery manager, and at the Austin Public Library while I completed my Master's Degree in Library and Information Science with a Youth Librarianship Certification. I have been a children's librarian for 12 years at the Wells Branch Library in Austin. As a Children's Librarian, I do weekly storytimes, science, art, LEGO programs, book clubs, cultural programs for families, as well as summer and winter reading programs. Most of these programs have been continuing virtually since COVID-19. I served three years on the Texas Library

Two Librarians... continued

Association Maverick committee. This is a state literary award selection committee for graphic novels for youth. I am currently serving on the Texas Library Association 2x2 Committee, which is an award committee for books for ages two to second grade.

SB: How do you help children find books they like?

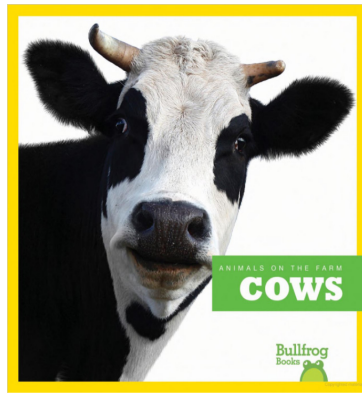
KJ: When I am assisting a child with finding a book, I ask what was the last book they've read that they've really loved. I can usually find a similar book they will enjoy by browsing the shelves with them, and asking them more questions. But if I'm having difficulty, I will use Novelist, which is a database within our catalog that searches our catalog for related titles, authors, or subjects. If a child doesn't know what they want to read, I often suggest that they select an award winning book such as a Newbery or Geisel Award. Also, the Texas Library Association lists additional information such as the 2x2, Bluebonnet, or Lone Star list.

SB: What kinds of books are most popular for different age ranges?

KJ: For babies and toddlers, our high-contrast, bold colors, and first word books with photographs (such as the Roger Priddy books) are the most popular. Pre-K readers love familiar characters, such as *Pete the Cat* and *Elephant and Piggie*. Pre-K readers frequently look for funny books, princess books, cars, trains, dinosaurs, and construction. We have a nonfiction series at our library called *Bullfrog Books* which have been extremely popular with the Pre-K age group. They have photographs, simple text, glossaries, and indexes. The K-3 readers really enjoy series books, especially if they have illustrations. The Scholastic imprint Branches and Acorn books have been very popular with this age group in the past year. The 3rd-5th grade readers also enjoy series books, as well as graphic novels.

SB: Have you noticed any trends in reading habits?

KJ: I have noticed many kids asking for graphic novels in the past few years. The graphic novel collection in our library is one of the smallest sections, yet has more total circulations than any other collection in the library. Kids are also seeking science fiction and fantasy series books.



SB: What age groups are attracted to illustrated books?

KJ: Children in Pre-K through 3rd grade seek illustrated books most often. The independent readers in this age group look for chapter books with illustrations as well as graphic novels.

SB: Do you find that children are attracted to books their friends like?

KJ: Children are attracted to books that their friends like, especially books that are related to the media, such as LEGO, Minecraft, and Star Wars.

SB: Are there holes in the market for the kinds of books in which children are seeking?

KJ: At our library, we have many children in 4th-6th grade who are advanced readers, but aren't ready for the mature content in the young adult collection. I am always struggling to find books that are challenging for them, but are also age-appropriate. I consistently have parents of Pre-K- aged children asking for books to help their child with reading skills. I would love to see more phonics and literacy skills books for this age group. Parents of young children have recently been seeking children's books about anger management, consent, and racism. We have very few of these books, and they are difficult to locate.

SB: What kinds of books are great read-alouds for storytimes?

KJ: During the school year, my storytime audience is mostly ages 0-3. For this age group, I enjoy reading books that have an interactive component such as repeating phrases, movement, and rhyming. For reading to a large group, I try to select books that have bright, bold illustrations, and diverse characters. I like to find books that are also interesting for the parents.

SB: Is there anything else you would like to add?

KJ: For the past few months, our library has been doing contact-free checkouts for patrons, and I have noticed some new trends in books that parents have been requesting. We get frequent requests for books about social skills, friendship, anxiety, starting school, and books to comfort their children. We have also noticed a big increase in requests for books with diverse characters. I'm hoping more books will be published to help children who are interested in learning more about COVID-19, and to help them process the emotions of attending a different school and home environment.

TIPS FOR ADDING TENSION TO ANY STORY

by Jane McBride

Whether you are writing mystery or suspense, romance or adventure, thrillers or otherworldly stories, you will want to create tension. “But,” you may protest, “I’m writing a historical novel about a family settling in the West. There’s no mystery or suspense or thriller elements in it. I don’t need tension in my book.”

You couldn’t be more wrong.

Every story, even those for the youngest readers, who are probably more listeners than readers at that age, needs tension. The iconic *Are You My Mother?* is filled with tension as the main character searches and searches for his mother. What about an easy-reader story about a child’s first day at school? Of course it will employ tension as the five-year-old protagonist wonders if he will survive going to a school with “big” kids and teachers he doesn’t know.

Now that we’ve established that every story needs tension, how do we go about creating it?

First, let’s look at the meaning of the word. Tension is derived from the Latin meaning “to stretch.” When things stretch too tightly, they’re likely to break. Think of the elastic in a pair of “comfort pants” (I am intimately familiar with such pants). Once it has stretched and stretched and stretched yet again, it snaps. The same holds true for your story characters. Once they have been stretched by events beyond their limit to bear they too will snap. That’s when things get interesting.

Let’s see how to add tension to your story using the Mini Blueprint format.

STEP 1: Engage the character’s emotions.

ACTION: A story may have characters who are always on the move. The action is non-stop. Every-

thing moves quickly, so quickly that the reader may not have time to catch her breath. This applies to the characters as well. They need to show emotion in the midst of all of this action. Does that mean you should write, “She felt tired after she completed the hike to the summit of the mountain?” Of course not. As in most of writing, the “show don’t tell” rule applies here. Perhaps we write instead, “Weariness dogged her when she reached the summit, but she had never felt more alive.” Give her time to experience the elation she feels upon accomplishing such a feat before moving on to the next action sequence. But suppose you are drawing a blank for the character’s emotions. Look at the internal conflict she may be experiencing. What if an 18-year-old boy competing for a scholarship somehow gets his hands on the test questions beforehand? He gets the highest mark in the school district on the test which is a large determinant of who will receive the scholarship. While he is being celebrated and feted by family and friends, he is wrestling with his conscience, knowing that he doesn’t deserve the scholarship and has cheated someone else out of it. Imagine the conflict, the emotional turmoil, he is experiencing. Will he confess or will he go on living a lie, taking it to college with him? Will he be able to live with himself or will he do something desperate?

STEP 2: Get your characters moving. Does this sound like the opposite counsel above? Not really.

ACTION: Eliminate the tea parties. Yes, I hear you saying, “But I don’t have any tea parties in my book.” We’re not talking here about actual tea parties. We’re talking about having characters sit and think and sit and think and sit and think some more. We’re talking about nothing happening. We’re talking about boredom. The cardinal rule in writing is DO NOT BORE THE READER. Sitting and thinking (and sipping tea) are boring. Unless the tea

Tips for Adding Tension...continued

is spiked with arsenic, skip these kinds of scenes. Instead, have your protagonist actively seek a solution to his problem. (He does have a problem, doesn't he?) Have him fighting off the zombies who are taking over his school. Have her compete in a music competition to earn a scholarship to Juilliard. Have her offer to tutor her nemesis in exchange for battling lessons so she can try out for the school softball team.

STEP 3: Use different sources for tension.

ACTION: If the primary goal of the sixth-grade hero of a story is to prevent a zombie attack, he already has plenty of tension in his life, but he might encounter other problems as well. Maybe he is the only one in his family who knows that he has been ordained to lead the charge against the zombies and he must keep up the appearance of normality with his family and friends. His parents still want him to do chores. He still has arguments with his big brother. He still has to do school work. Those are all possible sources of tension. This fits nicely with STEP 4.

STEP 4: Vary the degree of tension in your book.

ACTION: In adding complications (see below) to your protagonist's life, vary the sizes and severity and intensity of them. This will create small climaxes that will make the major conflict seem all the more powerful. Let's pretend we're writing a story about ten-year-old Max, who is in a wheelchair and is facing an operation that will determine if he may someday walk. The operation means Max will have to spend the next three months in a hospital, flat on his back, while he recovers. There is no guarantee that the operation will work. While Max is waiting for the operation, he encounters another problem, a boy in his school who taunts him. Max overcomes the relatively smaller problem, at the same time gathering strength for the bigger challenge. (This is not to say that bullying is a small problem, only that it is probably less traumatic than facing a life-altering operation.) Also, alternate between calm periods and tension-filled moments. An entire novel of tension-laden moments is hard to sustain, for the char-

acter and the reader.

STEP 5: Add complications to the character's life.

ACTION: Though we would never want to be mean to people in our lives, be mean to your characters! Pull out all the stops and pile on the suffering until the character thinks she can't take it any longer. Make these difficulties unique to your character. For a boy who is trying out for the junior varsity football team, not winning in the school poetry contest is probably not a big deal. However, if he fails to meet the physical requirements necessary to be able to play football, that's a big deal. Is your seventeen-year-old protagonist Mindy battling depression along with dealing with her parents' divorce? What will happen when Mindy finds out that she didn't get the scholarship she'd counted on to take her away from her horrible home life? What will she do to find a way out of her misery? Is she considering taking her own life? Is she so unhappy that she runs away from home? Show her agonizing over these bad possible choices.

STEP 6: Get rid of things that destroy tension.

ACTION: Eliminate overdone backstory and information dumps. Sift through the important details of the character's backstory and feed them a little at a time throughout the book. Likewise, eliminate the unnecessary (and boring) parts of dialogue. Your characters don't always have to say hello, goodbye, or some inane drivel about the weather. Keep dialogue crisp. Finally, always move the story forward.

 writing blueprints

Frequently we will be incorporating Mini Blueprints into CBI, which are based on the step-by-step way of learning in our full Writing Blueprints. If you're not familiar with our longer Writing Blueprints that take you through the process of writing, editing, submitting, marketing, or self-publishing your book, check out free trial editions here: <https://writingblueprints.com/p/free-trial-editions-of-our-top-blueprints>

Experiments to Take Your Writing Out of Your **COMFORTZONE**

by Jane McBride

Do you remember conducting science experiments in school? Or maybe you had a do-it-yourself science set at home where you made your own goo or conducted chemistry lab experiments.

Experimenting is fun. Somehow, though, we seem to forget that when it comes to our writing. We fall into a pattern of writing, for example, third person-simple past, and fail to look beyond it. At least that's what happened to me. Third person-simple past had the comfort of familiarity. I understood it. It understood me. And then I was challenged to write something in first person-present tense.

I resisted. I procrastinated. I hemmed and hawed my way in approaching the task, but when it came right down to the writing, I enjoyed it. I experimented with a different point-of-view, a different tense, and it was fun! What's more, I had a better story because of it.

That's what we're going to do in this article—experiment.

Experiment with POV & Tense

Here's a passage I made up for this purpose. First, let's write it in third person-simple past:

Wyatt was going to Grandma's house. Wyatt loved Grandma. He loved her bunches and bunches. But Grandma smelled funny. She smelled old.

The smell always made Wyatt's nose scrunch up. It really scrunched up when Grandma stooped to give him hugs and kisses.

When his family arrived at Grandma's house, Wyatt took a deep breath. Could he hold it long enough to get through the visit? He didn't want to hurt Grandma's feelings.

He held his breath so long that he was afraid he was going to explode. Finally he let it out in a rush of air.

"Wyatt, what's wrong?" Grandma asked.

"N ... nothing," he said. He sniffed. Grandma didn't smell funny anymore.

Let's try this again in first person-present tense:

Wyatt is going to Grandma's house. Wyatt loves Grandma. He loves her bunches and bunches. But Grandma smells funny. She smells old.

The smell always makes Wyatt's nose scrunch up. It really scrunches up when Grandma stoops to give him hugs and kisses.

When his family arrives at Grandma's house, Wyatt takes a deep breath. Can he hold it long enough to get through the visit? He doesn't want to hurt Grandma's feelings.

He holds his breath so long that he is afraid he is going to explode. Finally, he lets it out in a rush of air.

"Wyatt, what's wrong?" Grandma asks.

"N ... nothing," he says. He sniffs. Grandma doesn't smell funny anymore.

(Are you wondering why Grandma doesn't smell anymore?)

The changes from third to first person and from simple past to present tense were easy enough to make. Nothing else changed. You know what? I liked the second version better. It brought a refreshing immediacy to a young child's thoughts.

Comfort Zone continued

Try this with a passage from your own work. Or if you feel you don't want to experiment on your own work, try it with a story from public domain, such as a fairy tale. What feels more natural to you?

Experiment with Tone & Subject Matter

Okay. We've experimented with point-of-view and tense. What else can we experiment with? How about tone and subject matter? Do you usually write serious-minded stuff with a solemn tone? Or perhaps you feel more at ease writing humorous things with a light hand. Switch it around and bring a humorous tone to your serious stuff.

Here is the above story written in a serious tone about a serious subject:

Wyatt was going to Grandma's house. Wyatt loved Grandma. He loved her bunches and bunches. But Grandma smelled funny. She smelled sour, like the medicine he had to take when he was sick with an ear infection.

The smell always made Wyatt's nose scrunch up. It really scrunched up when Grandma stooped to give him hugs and kisses.

When his family arrived at Grandma's house, Wyatt took a deep breath. Could he hold it long enough to get through the visit? He didn't want to hurt Grandma's feelings.

He held his breath so long that he was afraid he was going to explode. Finally he let it out in a rush of air.

"Wyatt, what's wrong?" Grandma asked.

"N ... nothing," he said. He sniffed. Grandma still smelled funny. It was worse than ever. Why didn't Mommy and Daddy smell it, too? Why didn't they say something?

Wyatt saw that Grandma's face looked yellow. Grandma smelled sour because she had to take medicine. And then he knew. Don't ask him how. He just knew.

Grandma was dying.

How can we make the story humorous?

Wyatt is going to Grandma's house. Wyatt loves

Grandma. He loves her bunches and bunches. But Grandma smells funny. She smells old, like the funny white balls that Mommy puts in with the winter clothes. She calls them moth balls, but Wyatt never sees any moths in them.

The smell always makes Wyatt's nose scrunch up. It really scrunches up when Grandma stoops to give him hugs and kisses.

When his family arrives at Grandma's house, Wyatt takes a deep breath. Can he hold it long enough to get through the visit? He doesn't want to hurt Grandma's feelings.

He holds his breath so long that he is afraid he is going to explode.

"Wyatt, you're turning blue," his sister Sarah says. "Wyatt's turning blue! Wyatt's turning blue." Sarah sing-songs it over and over.

Finally, he lets his breath out in a rush of air. Wyatt sneezes as the breath bursts from his lungs. "Kerchoo!"

"Wyatt, what's wrong?" Grandma asks.

"N ... nothing," he says. He sniffs. Grandma doesn't smell funny anymore. She smells like peppermint!

Here, we've taken the same story and given it two different tones with two very different outcomes. Did you notice that I wrote the serious story in third person-simple past and the humorous story in first person-present tense? I could have reversed that, but the humorous story seemed to call for first person-present tense.

Other Thoughts

Another way to experiment with writing is to switch how you do the prep work for your idea. Do you normally do a formal outline with Roman numerals and letters? Or do you do a bullet-type of outline where you chronologically list what will happen? Do you not outline at all and instead write "by the seat of your pants?" (That's me.) Try a different form of outlining, or if you normally don't outline, do one. See where it takes you.

Experiment with your writing. See where it takes you. It may surprise you.

From the Editor

Dear Reader:

As I write this, Halloween is fast approaching, and my 4-year-old son is whipping himself into that pre-holiday frenzy that only children can muster. For two weeks now he's been eyeing the pumpkins sitting on our front stoop and asking when we'll carve them into Jack-O-Lanterns. He's had his costume picked out since early September, and enthusiastically lists the different types of candy he's sure to collect from the neighbors. We haven't even dug out the Halloween decorations yet—I save those for just a few days before the holiday, for fear of throwing Matthew into overload.

This is the first year that Matthew is old enough to realize that if Halloween is around the corner, then Christmas can't be far behind. He's been working on his list for Santa Claus and looking forward to a visit from his uncle in California. Watching Matthew as he savors the excitement of upcoming events has helped me remember the best part of the holiday season. It's not trying to decide if we're going to host Thanksgiving or Christmas, and where the visiting relatives will sleep. It's not making a budget for Hanukkah and Christmas presents and then breaking it. It's not even struggling to create meaningful family traditions and remembering the real value of the holidays while being bombarded with garish neighborhood light displays and rampant consumerism. No...the best part of the holidays is the anticipation.

We often say that young children have short attention spans and want instant gratification. But I remember as a little girl absolutely relishing the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Every day had a distinct purpose in the forward progression of events. Each step—whether it was a trip downtown to see the store window displays or baking gingerbread cookies—needed to be completely experienced before we could move on to the next event. The three days before Christmas were my favorite. All the holiday chores were done, and my father and I would spend evenings in the dark living room, lit only by the lights on the Christmas tree, and quietly wait for Christmas to come.

I've had several opportunities recently to speak with aspiring writers and it occurs to me that we could learn a lot from the children for whom we write. Yes, getting our manuscripts published is like opening presents on Christmas day; it's the frosting on the cake. But if we don't savor the process, we miss out on so much. I've had writers want me to critique their manuscripts before they've ever read a book or taken a class on writing. My suggestions for revisions wouldn't mean much to them if they don't understand what makes a good book in the first place. I've also had people call me up and want me to give them a list of publishers to whom they can send their manuscripts. Some of this is ignorance—they just don't know that not every publisher will want every book—but sometimes it's impatience. Part of the reason it's important to study the market, look at published books similar to yours in age group and subject, and send for publishers' catalogs and guidelines is that this all feeds into the writer's education. Every time you peruse a publisher's web site you learn a little more—where your book might fit, where it won't, what you need to improve, whether your nonfiction topic has just been done by someone else, where there's a hole in the market you can fill. There are no shortcuts to becoming an informed professional.

Crafting a quality book takes time, and each step is important. If you try to skip steps or gloss over learning certain skills (After all, won't the editor fix the holes in your plot?), you'll only hurt yourself. First of all, your manuscript will get rejected and ultimately you'll have to go back and rewrite it anyway. But more importantly, you'll rob yourself of the joy of the journey. Writing for children isn't just about getting published, it's about writing. Relish each step. When you finally understand how to plot out a novel, celebrate. When you delve deep into a character and find an eccentric quirk that will give your story depth, pat yourself on the back. Authors are always being told they need patience, and we tend to think this means the ability to wait several months to hear back from a publisher. But patience begins the moment you decide to write a book for children. If you love the process and appreciate each new skill you acquire, you're more inclined to see it through. You'll also be eager to start something new the moment you put your manuscript in the mail. It's the authors who are passionate about writing itself who get published. And it's their books that get wrapped up as the holiday presents children deliciously anticipate opening.

Sincerely,

Laura Backes

Editor