

WRITING CHILDREN'S NOVELS...

GENERAL GUIDELINES

1. A book kids will read to themselves. (rather than an adult reading them the book)
2. Length (very loose estimate)
 - Grades 1- 2 beginner approx 3,000 words, slightly higher 5,000 -10,000 words
 - Grades 3 – 5 12,000-25,000 words
 - Grades 6 – 8 30,000 words plus, often 50,000 or more
3. Central character usually 1-2 years older than the audience at which the story is aimed.
4. Limited number of supporting characters for youngest readers.
5. Many authors suggest first person point of view but I use first and third person equally.
6. Usually at least 10 chapters.
7. Most important thing in today's market - grab the young reader's attention and keep it!

GENRE

Much the same as adult genres: mystery, humor, historical fiction, magic realism, other-world fantasy, science fiction, animal stories, sports stories. Contemporary social issues such as bullying, drugs, anorexia, sexual relationships. Current world issues such as the difficult lives of children in countries experiencing conflict. And, of course, there are lots of cross-overs between all of the above. Your library and local book store will have examples. A tie-in to school curriculum is NOT necessary but if you do happen to have one it does make a story more appealing to publishers and teachers.

GETTING STARTED – My own way of writing. Many writers start differently!

Story Seed What I want to Write About	Remember the Child Within Lists	Modern Kids Picture real kids in real settings	Age Group that story is being written for	Type genre, market possibility, reader
--	---	---	--	---

1. Write first chapter. Jump right in! An opening that grabs the reader will also kick start your writing process - build plot, set tone and establish your commitment to the story itself.
2. I find Chapter 2 is really hard. Work on it a bit and get frustrated so now I have to stop and...
3. Plan – outline- brainstorm – Art of Possibility
4. But ALSO write! It doesn't have to be in order.
5. Work back and forth between planning and writing. You are on a voyage to discover what the story is *really* about. It's often different from the “story seed”.
6. Work back and forth between plot and character to build both up.
7. Look for a great ending. But if you can't find it yet, still keep writing!

IDEAS FOR KEEPING THE READERS ATTENTION

1. Alternate between two plot ideas, or between characters or between locations.
2. End chapters with cliffhangers. It will make you want to keep writing too!
3. Continue to push beyond the obvious. Remember the “Art of Possibility”.
4. Make “what happens next” entirely logical *and* a complete surprise.
5. Research. It will open up new ideas and directions!
6. Humor is always welcome, even (especially!) in a serious story.
7. Energy. Always! Write *what intrigues you* as well as young readers throughout your story.
8. Keep looking for what your story is *truly* about.
9. Find a great ending! A great ending will MAKE you finish the story.

BORING BASICS - BUT THEY NEED TO BE REMEMBERED

1. There needs to be a problem and tension/setbacks/difficulties culminating in a crises.
2. Central character (usually child) solves the problem. Not the teacher/grandparent/wise old owl.
3. Change in central character but not moralistic.

NUTS AND BOLTS



1. Whether you handwrite or use a computer, **keep everything!** Open and save each version with a new DATE/TIME on your computer. I also print hard copies, rewrite in pen, enter changes into computer, save under new date, print, repeat cycle.
2. Once the story begins to take form, I use a **spreadsheet** for my outline because I can change it easily, always saving revised versions. I use separate columns for chapter number, time line, setting, very brief reminder of what happens and a separate column for each character. Later I'll add word counts so I can balance chapter lengths if I wish.
3. I usually read it aloud to myself at many different parts of the process. I don't usually share it with others....but that really is a personal choice.

NOW THE GOOD NEWS

You only need **three chapters and an outline** to submit to an editor. I strongly suggest you have the entire story written in rough. But you only have to polish those first three chapters to send out.

REWRITING and POLISHING

1. Make sure the story happens right there on the page. (Show don't Tell)
2. Dialogue- yes! use it! but must – Reveal Character or Advance Plot or Portray Emotion
3. Take out unnecessary modifiers.
4. Take out extraneous material.
5. Find a unique way to say something!
6. Play with “point of view” if other things don't work.
7. Double check that the sentence length, paragraph length and vocabulary are all appropriate for the age level. Remember, however, that simple vocabulary does not mean simple ideas.

ENTER THE EDITOR (Whether official or unofficial)

1. Get the comments in writing (best!) or take notes and read the notes back to the “editor” to be sure that's what they mean. Ask for clarification if needed.
2. Don't say you agree or disagree. Don't argue. All you need to do at this point is *listen*.
3. It is widely suggested that you never rewrite a manuscript unless you have a contract. This EXCELLENT advice. On the other hand I would never have become a writer if I'd followed it. My guideline is always “If I rewrite with these suggestions in mind will I end up with a better story that I can then market elsewhere if this publisher still doesn't want it?”
4. Some suggestions will be fairly straightforward. Do them BETTER than the editor asks for!
5. Some suggestions will be totally unworkable. Or workable but entirely WRONG for the story. Your job is to figure out why the editor has made the suggestion, decide what is actually wrong and find an **ingenious** way to fix it.
6. Rewriting does not mean “writing more”. It means “writing with greater skill”.
7. If you have considered a suggestion from every possible angle over a reasonable amount of time and you still disagree ... **then** politely decline to make that particular change.

WRITING PICTURE BOOKS...

GENERAL GUIDELINES

1. Short – most often 500 – 800 words. Rarely over 1500 words.
2. Younger children (a. babies b. preschool c. grade school d. older)
3. A book that, most often, an adult will read to a child (a. must read well aloud b. everyday language but you don't have to be simplistic c. adult appeal if you can do it without sacrificing child appeal.)
4. Picture and words are equally important
5. 10 strong visual images - 24, 32, 48 pages
6. If your book is accepted, the publisher will find an illustrator.

THERE ARE LOTS OF DIFFERENT TYPES

Go to the library and read lots of picture books. Go to book stores and see what's new and amazing. Subjects include: educational, help with specific problems, understanding others, awareness of heritage, occasion books, religious values, play with language, legends, subject of the moment (eg. dinosaurs) unusual real life, stories about ourselves, funny family stories, modern fairy tales, fractured fairy tales, nonsense stories, exaggeration stories and many, many others

BUT MOST IMPORTANTLY

➔ AN IDEA THAT SPEAKS TO A YOUNG CHILD'S WORLD ←

GETTING IDEAS

1. Your own childhood (but not nostalgic)
2. Hang out around children, keep a notebook
3. List things that intrigue children or things they love to do
4. Build on ideas that others might offer you ... but find the true story value
5. Be aware of things in the greater world that filter down to young children
6. Play “what if” from a child's point of view

BUT MOST IMPORTANTLY WATCH FOR

➔ ORIGINAL IDEA or A UNIQUE TWIST ON AN OLD IDEA ←

HELPING YOUR IDEA ALONG

1. Stories need a problem
2. The **child** (not the parent or wise old owl) must solve the problem
3. The problem is going to lead to a crises. Creative solutions to a crises are best.
4. Think in terms of at least 10 strong “thought packages”. Every time you turn a page there is something “new” happening.... a new “thought package”. Often a new visual image.
5. A setting with many strong visual possibilities will help the illustrator create engaging pictures and an editor will be more likely to choose that manuscript in the first place
6. Don't “write to formula” but be aware of the form if your story falls into one naturally.
7. A twist at the end is great if possible
8. Consider adult appeal... which might also include school curriculum.
9. Say things in a unique way...the language itself is hugely important in a picture book.
10. Be aware that picture books have pacing and rhythm, even if they aren't poems.
11. Give it a great title

TEST YOUR PICTURE BOOK MANUSCRIPT

1. Read it to yourself aloud
2. Read it to kids
3. Don't explain what the pictures will be – your story must stand alone.
4. Don't ask if they like it. Instead note when they are listening and when they aren't.
5. Do ask them if there are any parts they don't understand.
6. Rewrite it addressing pace, language that was hard to read, anything not fully understood and strengthen parts they especially enjoyed!

SUBMITTING PICTURE BOOK MANUSCRIPT TO A PUBLISHER

1. Typed, double spaced, nice big margin.
2. Cover letter if you have a good “pitch point”.
3. Don't describe what the illustrations should be unless ABSOLUTELY necessary to the plot and then be VERY brief.
4. Self Address Stamped Envelope (U.S. Postage if sent to U.S.)
5. Simultaneous submissions (sending to several publisher at the same time) are OK so long as the publishers guidelines indicate it is acceptable and you write “simultaneous submission” on the manuscript itself.
6. Keep a list of when each manuscript was sent out and to what publisher.



MARKET LISTINGS and HELPFUL ORGANIZATIONS FOR WRITERS OF ALL KINDS

1. **The Canadian Children's Book Centre:** “Get Published – The Writing for Children Kit” (\$20) includes hints, submission guidelines and a list of Canadian publishers currently accepting children's manuscripts. <http://www.bookcentre.ca/>
2. **The Writers' Union of Canada:** One has to have a book published to join but the pamphlets are available to all. \$9 ea. Subjects : Agents, Contracts, Grants, List of Publishers and many others topics for writers all kinds. Excellent quality information. <http://www.writersunion.ca/>
3. **Public Libraries - *Children's Writers' and Illustrators' Market*** from Writers' Digest publications in the U.S. but covers Canada and the U.K. too...and ***Writers Market*** also from Writer's Digest publications. Also watch for latest edition of *The Canadian Writers Market* and others on the same shelf. They will be in the reference section. Might need the librarian to help find them These books contain many very good articles about writing plus information about contacting publishers.
4. **CANSCAIP** (Canadian Society of Children's Authors Illustrators and Performers)
You can join as an “associate” member if you aren't published. Regular newsletters with good hints and market listings website: <http://www.canscaip.org/>
5. **Writers Guild of Alberta** - a provincial organization anyone can join. Very helpful. Bimonthly magazine with news, markets, updates on issues of interest for writers working in all genres.... adult, childrens', fiction, non-fiction, journalists.... <http://www.writersguild.ab.ca/>