

Secrets of Writing for Children



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DISCLAIMER

All the following writing advice is either my own, or gathered over many years from fellow writers or unknown sources. If any of the original authors come to light, I would be happy to give attribution and great praise.

NOTE

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What to Aim for When Writing

Do you know what a protagonist's voice is?

Must rhyming picture books have a good story line?

Having trouble with your plot and dialog?

A Hook? Focus? What are they and why do you need them?

Focus

Focus means knowing where your story is going and keeping it on track. Focus is not allowing paragraphs or pages to develop a life of their own and wander far from the main plot.

Note: Keep track of the small details. Make sure you take a character from point A to point B before you have them pop up with dialogue. Always get to the point via the shortest route and the least number of words. Choose your words for their power and evocative content. When descriptions and scenes go on too long, readers lose the thread. FOCUS on the details of your plot, and avoid being sidetracked.

Story Elements

Plot and Character Development

Story Development goes hand-in-hand with Focus. Before you begin writing, have a rough idea of where the plot will take your characters. Get your main POV (point of view) character set up fast. Your POV needs a distinctive "voice." This means the way he talks, the way he moves, and the way he interacts with others. Give him foibles, or mannerisms that make him stand out as unique. Get to the meat of the story ASAP.

Note: Always think kid! Editors (and kids) want actions, reactions, and great dialogue.

Sentence Structure

Sentence structure needs clarity above all else, plus appropriate grammar and punctuation. Great writers use words to paint pictures. You never have to read their sentences twice to grasp their meaning. Sentences need to be smooth and natural - like they came from the mind of a real person - dialogue likewise. Active and powerful verbs are a writer's best friend. Use a good thesaurus to find new, fresh, and evocative adjectives. Be wary of adverbs - they mostly prop up weak verbs.

Note: Your sentences need to draw your reader in, and show what is happening with absolute clarity.

Tight Writing

Tight writing is partnered with Sentence Structure. Never use ten words when 5 will do the job. One wonderful adjective, plus a strong verb, will give you a powerful sentence. Weak verbs, held up by an adverb or two, plus a wishy-washy adjective, give you nothing an editor will bother to read. If the sentence, paragraph or page, does not move the story forward, cut it!

Note: Overwriting is common. This happens when you use too many words. Paint a clear word picture and then move on. Waffles are for breakfast, not for books.

Character Enrichment

Character enrichment means letting the reader into the heart and soul of the POV. Do this by his actions, his dialogue, and his inner thoughts and angst. Let him have faults that he overcomes. Let him grow as a person. Make sure he has a distinctive "voice," one that remains constant throughout the story. Your reader wants to root for, and identify with, your lead character.

Note: Rich characters have layers of interest. These layers are built up chapter by chapter - a dab of information here, a little background there, some dialogue that lets out a few

secrets, etc. Dialogue that is overheard by your POV can inject interesting facts or back- story into the plot. Adding actions and reactions works. Beware of the "information dump." This is when a huge chunk of detail or information is dropped onto a page. Personal thoughts are a wonderful way of getting into the head and heart of your POV.

The Art of the “Hook”

Writing That "Hooks" Your Reader

Hooking your reader is simple. Plenty of action, dialogue, and pace. You lose your reader when the story wanders away from the action for too long. Build tension by seeding hints and clues. Offer portents. Keep your writing tight. Especially in a mystery.

Note: End chapters with a hook - a cliffhanger thought or event that lures the reader into turning the page. Make it so they can't resist.

Pace & Tension

Overwriting (waffling) is the enemy of Pace. A slow build up of tension gives good pace. Dropping hints and clues build tension, which in turn moves your story along. Short, punchy sentences give better pace than longwinded lines.

Note: Shorter chapters (5-7 pages) give a feeling of faster pace.

Suggestion

Make the local librarian your friend - they love to help writers. Your librarian can recommend classic, as well as just published books, by authors who have the genre down cold. Dissect the plots and the characters in the books you love, and you will discover what makes them work so well.

Creating Tension: The Three C's (The Clock - The Crucible - The Contract)

We've all heard of the four C's of diamond buying, but writing suspenseful fiction has some C's of its own. Here are three elements that your favorite authors invariably employ in their manuscripts to infuse their stories with extra pace and tension.

The Clock

Placing your action in the shadow of a ticking clock. Nothing intensifies dramatic tension like time pressure.. a fixed window of opportunity after which all is lost. In some genres the time pressure literally can be a ticking bomb (a la James Bond), but more subtle ways exist to apply time pressure. *Bridges of Madison County* is a good example. In *Bridges*, the heroine must make a major life decision before her family returns from vacation in three days. (If she'd had the rest of her life to make the decision, the story would have been dull.) Time pressure forces your characters to take action.

The Crucible

Constraining your characters as you apply the heat. A crucible is defined in Webster's as "an enclosed vessel used for melting materials at high temperatures." Whenever possible, place your characters in a crucible. Lock them in to that when you turn up the heat, they do not have the option of running away. In other words, tie our characters' hands and force them to become resourceful in finding a solution to whatever challenges you put before them. Peter Benchley

created a brilliant crucible for his characters in the final scene of Jaws. He placed them on a sinking boat... with the radio blown out... miles from shore... the shark closing in. Even if his characters wanted to run, they could not. They were constrained. The ocean was their crucible.

The Contract

Making promises to your reader, and then keeping them. Good writers create tension by filling the pages of their novels with "promises" to their readers. For example, if an author makes ominous mention of a loaded shotgun in the closet, the reader perceives this as a contract with the author: If I keep reading, that shotgun will be used. This promise serves as foreshadowing and creates tension. When will the gun be used? Against whom? Promises can work on more subtle levels too. By describing a gathering storm outside a character's window (and doing it in just the right way) you can promise your reader that tough times lay ahead for this poor soul. Again tension. Remember, though, once you make your reader a promise, you better deliver.

Powerful Writing Tips

(That Will Help You Get Published)

Setting, Setting, Setting

Expose your readers to new worlds.

All readers (editors & agents included) love to learn as they read. Whenever possible, place your action in a setting that treats your readers to a locale about which they know very little. A dairy farm, a secret intelligence agency, a coalmine, even another time in history are all settings that have the potential to transport readers to new worlds. It's no secret that the success of medical and legal thrillers is due in large part to their "settings" (we all love to learn about the inner workings of hospitals and courtrooms.) Readers love to learn, so choose settings that teach.

In and Out Scene-Building

Keep things moving.

Regardless of what type of manuscript you're writing, scenes that "drag" are the kiss of death. Often, dull scenes are the result of elaborate setups and wind-downs -- extra commentary before and after the critical event. You often hear successful authors and screenwriters quote the mantra, "In late, out early." This simply means that they open their scenes as late into the action as possible and close their scenes as early as possible (often before the action has even concluded.) If you have a scene that seems to drag, try trimming from the beginning and the end rather than the middle.

A Sole Dramatic Question

Build your foundation with a SINGLE brick

The best manuscripts have a single dramatic question: Will Ahab catch the whale? Will the Jackal kill his target? Will the young lawyer escape the corrupt law firm that hired him? The twists and turns in your novel can (and should!) be intricate, but your foundation needs to have a sole, central conflict around which all the action revolves. A good way to test your manuscript is to synopsise your plot in a single sentence. Can you do it?

Information Weaving

Doling out description in bite-sized chunks

Once you've researched the "specifics" of your novel, there is an overwhelming urge not to let any of it go to waste. Be careful. Long dry passages of description are a turnoff to readers and agents alike. Remember, we read novels to find out what happens to characters (if we want to read a five-page description of New Delhi, we buy a travel guide.) whenever possible, intersperse your factual description with action and dialog. Better yet, have your characters interacting with your description, that is, let your characters see, smell, and taste your specifics.

What I Look For When I Critique Your Picture Book

Some thoughts from Margot about what she looks for when critiquing a picture book:

When I critique PBs I look for the following: but mostly, I give personal guidance. I do this by offering examples, explanations, and suggestions.

Tight Writing: This means not using ten words when three or four will do the trick. Aim for less than 1,000 words - the younger the child the fewer the words.

Think Actions and Reactions: Telling is a big yawn. Go for actions, reactions and dialogue. Strong verbs are needed.

Word Choice: Appropriate for the age, new and fresh.

Verbs: Powerful active verbs that show actions and reactions. (Strong verbs are a PB writer's best friend)

Adjectives: Evocative, whimsical, and fun. One terrific adjective does the trick!

Adverbs: Occasional use only -- make sure it is not there to prop up a ho-hum verb.

Qualifiers: Most of these pesky and unnecessary words can be ruthlessly pruned.

Getting to the Point: Introduction of characters & the setting. Yiikes, where is the conflict, plot, or reason for this

story? Look for a tidy and satisfactory conclusion. Unnecessary details can balloon what should be a 500 word story into a 1,500 word marathon. Readers get lost in a jungle of words!

Think Illustrations: Look for an even distribution of terrific illustration opportunities. The writer and the artist are a team that compliment each other. The writer leaves word clues, which the artist interprets, filling the illustrations with marvelous details.

Painting with Words: Great PB writers paint word pictures. Choose each word with care. The aim is to say a lot with only a few words. "Less is more!"

Lyrical Flow: Look for a smooth story flow. It does not have to be poetry to have a lyrical feel. Characters and plot appear real and effortless.

Kid Appeal: Always think KID. Does the story have kid appeal? Will kids want it read to them, over and over? Will kids identify with and root for the main characters? Does it feel right?

Self Editing Tip Sheet

Use your "Find" application to track down the troublesome words below.

DOWN

If the verb implies down, "down" is unnecessary.

*She sat down in the chair.

*She sat in the chair.

UP

If the verb implies up, "up" is unnecessary.

*He stood up.

*He stood.

OUT

If the verb implies out, "out" is unnecessary.

*The cloth was spread out over the table.

*The cloth was spread over the table.

THEN

If an action follows, "then" is implied.

*He aimed the gun, then fired.

*He aimed the gun and fired.

BEGAN - STARTED

*He raised an arm and began to scrub viciously at his skin.

*He raised an arm and scrubbed viciously at his skin.

*He lifted the pen and started to write.

*He lifted the pen and wrote.

FELT - FEEL

Weak words can often be replaced to create a clearer image

*The chill of the night air had little to do with the cold she felt.

*The chill of the night air had little to do with the cold swirling inside her.

BACK

Often a given if the subject of the sentence is doing one thing and then does another. Also note in the example, down was unneeded.

*Jessie shook her head as she gazed back down at the child.

*Jessie shook her head as she gazed at the child.

BACK - RETURNED

Sometimes "returned" can signal going back to a previous action.

*He turned his attention back to the raging storm.

*He returned his attention to the raging storm.

PASSIVE VOICE

Various methods of torture developed by his ancestors were contemplated by Harrison.

ACTIVE VOICE

Harrison contemplated various methods of torture developed by his ancestors.

INSTEAD

Often unnecessary. It's a given that he didn't land on the chair if he landed on the floor.

*He'd land on the floor instead of the chair.

*He'd land on the floor.

TO THE

Often causes wordiness

*The door to the office.

*The office door.

SUDDENLY

Seldom needed. If it's the next action, writing it as such often eliminates the need for the word.

*Suddenly the bull lurched forward.

*The bull lurched forward.

BE -ING

Sometimes makes for longer, weaker sentences.

*I suppose I should be thanking you.

*I suppose I should thank you.

COULD

Determine if the sentence conveys the information without it.

*He could see her walking toward him.

*He saw her walking toward him.

*Even better: She walked toward him.

WOULD

Determine which sentence is stronger and if "would" is needed. Sometimes it is.

*Occasionally, he would catch her watching him.

*Occasionally, he caught her watching him.

THERE

Generally weak and should be removed when possible.

*If there are men that close--

*If men are that close--

SEEMED

Use only when you want to create an image of doubt.

*Harry's presence seemed to dominate the camp.

*Harry's presence dominated the camp.

WAS (and other linking verbs)

Signals a possible weak sentence that can be punched up with a stronger action verb.

*His only fear was--

*He feared--

TO BE

Another example of wordiness.

*He needs to be scrubbing.

*He needs to scrub.

THAT

A word we all overuse; sometimes it's necessary, often it's not. Always try the sentence without it and see if it means the same.

JUST

Another word we overuse. Try some of the synonyms like merely, only.

Checklist for Mid Grade & YA

Setting: Does my setting reveal a "new world" to my readers? Does it have the potential to teach?

In-And-Out Scene Building: Do my scenes start late and end early? Does my plot keep moving? Can I trim excess fat from lead-ins and wrap-ups?

Dramatic Question: Is the fundamental question driving the action a simple one? Can my plot be summed up in a single sentence?

Tension: Do I employ the three C's? Do my characters exist in the shadow of a ticking clock? Are they constrained by some sort of crucible? Do I make contracts with my reader... and then follow through?

Research: Do I know enough about my topic to write a manuscript filled with specifics? What (specifically) will my reader learn?

Weaving Information: Is my background information "woven" into my story, or does it occur in long blocks of description?

Revision: Have I reworked my manuscript many times? Have others read it and offered criticism? Have I tightened dull scenes? Have I seasoned the stew?

About the Author

Margot Finke grew up in Queensland, Australia. Today she lives in Oregon, USA, with her husband. Their three children are grown and on their own, so she now has plenty of time to write rhyming picture books and mid grade adventures. This late starts drives Margot's writing, and pushes her to work at it every day. "I love writing," she says. "It is a constant challenge and joy. My husband is very supportive. He says writing keeps me out of mischief."

Gardening on their acre of property, just outside of town, plus travel and reading, fill in the cracks between her writing. Margot's web site helps new writers, and her "Musings" column appears in two magazines.

Margot's website at <http://www.margotfinke.com> offers a Manuscript Critique Service, plus lots of help for new writers, and a link to her "Musings" column. Her 6 book series of rhyming picture books tells fun, educational tales about animals in Australia and the USA, visit her Books page for more information.