

11 Steps to Writing Your First Children's Book



by the Editors of

Children's Book Insider, The Newsletter for Children's Writers

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So, You Wanna Be a Children's Book Writer?

Awesome! Writing a children's book is one of the most rewarding and enriching experiences imaginable.



We've been helping ordinary folks just like you become published children's book authors since 1990 and, along the way, we've managed to boil down the entire process into ten steps (plus **one bonus step** that's maybe the most important...).

In this eBook, we'll share those steps with you, and provide links to great information that will make your journey enjoyable, easy and fun.

We hope you'll be inspired and encouraged by what you'll find. We also hope that you'll make the big step that has lifted many people from "wannabe" status to being successful authors: joining the Fightin' Bookworms of Children's Book Insider!

We have a special offer for you later on. Until then, let's start your journey!

PS: If you enjoy the book, please share it with other aspiring writers by using the Twitter and Facebook links at the bottom of each page. We'd really appreciate it!



Jon Bard
Laura Backes

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Step 1: Get the Right Mindset

If you dream of writing for children because you see it as a route to fame and riches, it's time we had a little talk:



That's probably not going to happen.

Sure, it *might* happen -- J.K. Rowling's doing quite nicely, thank you. But the vast majority of children's writers do it for love, not money. They have a passion for sharing ideas and connecting with young readers that means more than wealth or recognition.

If you have that passion, than all the lonely hours of writing and the occasional rejection letter are just small prices to pay for the opportunity to create something wonderful and (hopefully) lasting.

So let's start our journey by looking inward. I'm going to ask you some questions. Take whatever time you need and answer them honestly. If you've printed this eBook out, write the answers in the space provided. Otherwise, write your answers in a journal or other text document. Here goes:

Why do you want to write for children?

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What unique viewpoints, experience or wisdom do you have to offer young readers?



How well do you deal with criticism and rejection? If the answer is "not so well", are you willing to develop a thicker skin?

Do you regularly read current children's books, or is your knowledge of the children's book market largely based on your own childhood experience, or from being a parent years ago?

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Are you willing to learn, and invest in yourself to become a better writer?



This isn't a quiz, and there are no right or wrong answers. But there are some things you need to understand before we proceed:

This will take time. Anyone who tells you that you can knock out a children's book, send it off to a paying publisher and see your book on the shelves in a couple of months isn't being truthful. You'll have peaks and valleys on your journey that will require patience and perseverance.

It's not easy. Contrary to what you may have been told, writing children's books is not easier than writing for adults. Yes, kids' books are shorter, but that just makes things more challenging. The author Mem Fox put it best: "Writing a picture book is like writing 'War and Peace' in haiku."

Craft is Everything. There are two kinds of writers – those who say "I've written my story. Where do I send it?" and those who say "I've written my first draft. How do I make the plot smoother, the dialogue better and the characters more believable?" Can you guess which author invariably succeeds? Writing is an art. Mastering it offers the same challenges and rewards of mastering the violin, or skiing or painting. Take your time, sharpen your skill, learn to love the journey.

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Publishing will always be out there but, if you really want to make, worry more about being a skilled writer. The rest will take care of itself.



Don't Preach. You have a message you want to impart to kids? That's fine. But chill. No one, young or old, wants to read a story that practically bangs them over the head with a "moral".



Skillful writers know how to subtly incorporate their message into a compelling read. Until you master your craft, stick to making kids laugh, or gasp with fear or swoon with romance before you try to tell them something "important".

Relax. For all it's challenges, starting a children's writing career is a truly wonderful adventure. You'll meet amazing folks along the way, learn more about yourself than you ever imagined and, ultimately, make your mark on the life of a young reader. That's pretty cool. Just remember to have patience, stay the course, invest in learning to sharpen your skills and keep on writing no matter what. They payoff is certain to be worth it!

Now go back and look at the answers you provided to the questions I posed. Do they fit with what we've just covered? Are there some areas that will require a bit of attitude adjustment? Let all of this sink in a bit and revisit those questions later. You might just find that you're very much prepared for the journey ahead.

Before we leave Step 1, here are some links that will really help:

[VIDEO: Think Like a Writer, Not an Author](#)
[5 Ways for Writers to Blast Through Self-Doubt](#)

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Step 2: Choose Your Age Group

The world of children's literature is divided along age lines. Become familiar with the standard categories and read from each of them. Before long you'll find yourself gravitating toward one or two of these. That's how you'll know which age group you're best suited for.



Here are the categories, along with some classic books to check out:

*** Picture books** — In its broadest definition, a picture book is a book in which the illustrations play a significant role in telling the story. Under this umbrella are several types of books:

1. *Baby Books* – For infants and young toddlers, these books are generally lullabies, nursery rhymes, fingerplays, or wordless books. The length and format varies with the content.

2. *Toddler books* – Very simple stories for ages 1-3 (under 300 words) familiar to a child's everyday life, or concept books (teaching colors, numbers, shapes, etc.) Books are short (12 pages is average) and the format can be board books (sturdy paper-over board construction), pop-ups, lift-the flaps or novelty books (books that make sounds, have different textures, etc.) See the "Max" series of board books by Rosemary Wells (Dial).

3. *Picture books* – Traditionally, picture books (also called "picture story books") are 32-page books for ages 4-8 (this age may vary slightly by publisher). Manuscripts are up to 1500 words, with 1000 words being the average length.

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Plots are simple (no sub-plots or complicated twists) with one main character who embodies the child's emotions, concerns and viewpoint. The illustrations (on every page or every other page) play as great a role as the text in telling the story. Occasionally a picture book will exceed 1500 words; this is usually geared toward the upper end of the age spectrum. Picture books cover a wide range of topics and styles. The list of Caldecott Medal winners, available here, is a good place to start your research. Nonfiction in the picture book format can go up to age 10, 48 pages in length, or up to about 2000 words of text.



4. *Early picture books* – A term for picture books geared toward the lower end of the 4-8 age range. These stories are simple and contain under 1000 words. Many early picture books have been reprinted in the board book format, thus widening the audience. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle (Philomel) is an example.

* **Easy readers** – Also called "easy-to-read", these books are for children just starting to read on their own (age 6-8). They have color illustrations on every page like a picture book, but the format is more "grown-up" – smaller trim size, sometimes broken into short chapters. The length varies greatly by publisher; the books can be 32-64 pages long, with 200-1500 words of text, occasionally going up to 2000 words. The stories are told mainly through action and dialogue, in grammatically simple sentences (one idea per sentence). Books average 2-5 sentences per page. See the "Amelia Bedelia" books by Peggy Parish or other "I Can Read" books published by Harper Trophy.

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* **Transition books** — Sometimes called "early chapter books" for ages 6-9, they bridge the gap between easy readers and chapter books. Written like easy readers in style, transition books are longer (manuscripts are about 30 pages long, broken into 2-3 page chapters), books have a smaller trim size with black-and-white illustrations every few pages. See "The Kids of the Polk Street School" series by Patricia Reilly Giff (Dell) or the "Stepping Stone Books" published by Random House.



* **Chapter books** — For ages 7-10, these books are 45-60 manuscript pages long, broken into 3-4 page chapters. Stories are meatier than transition books, though still contain a lot of action. The sentences can be a bit more complex, but paragraphs are still short (2-4 sentences is average). Chapters often end in the middle of a scene to keep the reader turning the pages. Look at the "Herbie Jones" books by Suzy Kline (Puffin) and the "Ramona" books by Beverly Cleary (Morrow).

* **Middle grade** — This is the golden age of reading for many children, ages 8-12. Manuscripts suddenly get longer (100-150 pages), stories more complex (sub-plots involving secondary characters are woven through the story) and themes more sophisticated. Kids get hooked on characters at this age, which explains the popularity of series with 20 or more books involving the same cast. Fiction genres range from contemporary to historical to science fiction/fantasy; nonfiction includes biographies, science, history and multicultural topics. Check out some middle grade novels from the [list of Newbery Medal winners](#) to get you started.

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* **Young adult** – For ages 12 and up, these manuscripts are 130 to about 200 pages long. Plots can be complex with several major characters, though one character should emerge as the focus of the book. Themes should be relevant to the problems and struggles of today's teenagers, regardless of the genre. *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton defined young adult when it was first published in 1967; the Newbery Medal award list also contains many worthy titles. A newer age category (10-14) is emerging, especially with young adult nonfiction. These books are slightly shorter than the 12 and up category, and topics (both fiction and nonfiction) are appropriate for children who have outgrown middle grade but aren't yet ready for the themes (fiction) or who aren't studying the subjects (nonfiction) of high school readers.



Before you move on, check out this short video:

[How Do I Determine the Proper Age Group For My Manuscript?](#)

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Step 3: Develop Your Idea

Let's begin with a simple test to determine what, exactly, you feel passionate about. Once we have that, you can start polishing a story idea.



You walk into a bookstore with a large magazine selection. Where do you go first?

Crafts magazines? Photography? Sports? Cooking?

Your answer (unless you head right to *Playboy* or *High Times*) has given you a tremendous starting point for your first story. Start with your passion and writing will seem much, much easier!

Combine this passion with what we've just learned about age groups and you might start seeing a clear picture of your first manuscript. A middle grade story about a young photographer? A chapter book about a boy who dreams of being a famous chef? A picture book about a little girl who idolizes race car drivers and wants to be one? It's all up to you!

So, now that you've explored your interests and discovered that you're drawn to picture book biographies, or middle grade novels, or silly easy readers, you've probably got some ideas itching to be developed. So let's see if they're really ready to be turned into books.

First, sum up your idea. Write the general concept for your story or nonfiction book in one to three sentences. You're not going to get every nuanced relationship or plot point into those three sentences, but you should be able to convey the essence of what makes your idea unique. You may not know much about your idea at this point, so write what you know.

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Maybe you know your main character and his/her problem, and have some ideas about how that problem might be solved.



Perhaps you read an article about new research being done on how dolphins communicate, and think the topic would make a great picture book.



Sum up your idea and a few specific key points that give your idea some shape. "Dolphins" isn't specific enough. "How dolphins communicate, and new research that suggests dolphins actually have a meaningful language" is a starting point for a book. "Jeremy gets a new baby brother," isn't anything special. "Jeremy tries to sell his new baby brother at the neighborhood garage sale" is the basis for a plot.

If you've been reading books for the age group you're interested in writing for, now you can **compare your idea to published books and judge if it's right for your audience**. Does your picture book idea lend itself well to many different action scenes and illustrations? Or does it rely heavily on dialogue and internal character development that is best expressed through thoughts and emotions? If the latter applies to your idea, it's better suited to a novel.

Since it's still just an idea (and not the whole first draft of your manuscript), you shouldn't be too invested in keeping it exactly as it first came to you. In most cases, published books are the result of ideas that have evolved past the initial spark of inspiration. So now's the time to **brainstorm and play with the concept**. Ask, "What if?" What if the main character were a boy instead of a girl? What if I used my idea as a springboard for a more complex story for young adults? What if I changed the time period from the present to 1975?

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What if I took my serious topic of global warming and added some humorous sidebars? Or, what if I created a child character to “host” the book, who lives in the future after many of the climate changes have taken place? What if I wrote the entire book as free verse? What if my picture book looked like different pages from a character’s web site?



Think big. **Get weird.** Reach for the most outrageous concept you can, then dial it back until it makes sense. The one thing that will keep your idea from ever getting published is if it’s ordinary. A predictable, safe, run-of-the-mill book simply won’t justify the publisher’s substantial financial investment to bring it to print. Your book doesn’t have to be shocking, or violent, or disturbing, but it does have to be fresh, interesting and surprising. It has to be something the editor’s never seen before. And chances are, your first idea won’t fit these criteria.

Study authors who have charted new ground with their books. Look at *Pirates* by David L. Harrison, illustrated by Dan Burr (nonfiction picture book for ages 8-12, written as a collection of poems); *ttyl* by Lauren Myracle (young adult story of three high school girls written as Instant Messages); *Lincoln Shot: A President’s Life Remembered* by Barry Denenberg, illustrated by Christopher Bing (written as a commemorative edition of *The National News* one year after Lincoln’s death, the entire book looks like a 19th-century newspaper); or Dav Pilkey’s Captain Underpants chapter book series (each book a combination of story, comic strip, and Flip-O-Rama). All these books embodied themes and ideas that had been touched on before, but packaged in a new, exciting way.

Now, watch this:

[Laura Backes on Developing Stories for Different Age Groups](#)

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Step 4: Write Your First Draft

Over the past 23 years, we've written enough on the subject of writing craft to fill a library or two. Any attempt to distill that into a few paragraphs would be a major disservice. So here's where we have to make a pitch:



Join the Fightin' Bookworms and we'll teach you everything you need to know.

Plot, dialogue, pacing, point of view, character development.... It's not brain surgery, but it will take some time and attention. So seriously, spend what you would each month on a light snack and you'll have it all at your fingertips. Check us out at <http://cbiclubhouse.com>

Until then, here are a few pieces of writing instruction to get you started:

Writing Picture Books - How to Get Started

Write for Success: 7 Tips For Children's Book Writers

Writing Tips: 4 Rules Beginning Children's Book Writers Should Never Break

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Step 5: Start Revising

There's a reason your manuscript, in its current state, is called a "First Draft". It's because there's a second, third and fourth draft still to come (at least).



I don't care how great you think your first draft is, it can get better. And it must get better. So now's the time to take your ego out of the equation and look hard at what you've written.

Here's a cheat sheet to help you:

1. Go to the library and ask for the librarian's opinion about the best recent books in your age range. Read them. Then read your manuscript. How do they differ? Where does your story bog down while the other books soar? If you're honest with yourself, you'll soon see that you have work to do. If you're attentive, you'll also know where you have work to do.

2. Read your manuscript multiple times, each time looking at only one specific thing:

- * Is the plot interesting and realistic?
- * Are the characters real, or do they sound stagey and stiff?
- * Does your dialogue sound like two real people who actually having a discussion?
- * Are you describing too much, rather than letting the details unfold naturally? (This is also known by the old axiom "show, don't tell".)
- * Does your idea still hold up? If not, change it to make it more original/marketable/interesting.)

Starting to discover your flaws? Great! Now rewrite that manuscript!

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Step 6: Get Feedback

OK, here comes the scary part: It's time to let someone else look at your manuscript!



But not just anyone. What you need here isn't cheerleading from loved ones. The most important feedback you can get is actual constructive criticism from people who know children's literature.

There are a few places to look for honest feedback:

Your local children's librarian. She's pretty busy but, if you develop a relationship and ask nicely, your friendly local librarian may be willing to take a gander at your story and offer some thoughts.

Local writer's groups. Check the bulletin board at your library and poke around Craigslist to see if any active writing groups are accepting new members in your area. Meetup.com is worth a look, too.

Online critique partners. At the [CBI Clubhouse](#), Fightin' Bookworms can connect via our Critique Exchange and swap critiques with one another. It's a great way to make new writing friends, get feedback and sharpen your own critiquing skills.

Professional Critique Services: Spending a bit of money and having a professional editor review your critique can be a great investment. This is the ultimate in objective, expert opinions. Here's some info about a service we offer:

<http://cbiclubhouse.com/clubhouse/get-a-personalized-critique/>

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