

Picture Book Writing Tips

Writing children's picture books is not as easy as it looks. Yes, there are fewer words but those words need to be the right words!

- Picture book format - a standard children's picture book is 32 pages.
- The front matter (title page, dedication, copyright) takes up several pages. Actual text usually begins on page 5 or 7. This leaves you with 25-28 pages to tell your story.
- Think about the illustrations. A children's picture book needs to strike a balance between the text and the illustrations.
- The text should be able to be divided up evenly, with a fairly equal amount of text on each page.
- Each page, or each double page spread, has a sentence or two or a paragraph.
- Each of these sentences or paragraphs must lend themselves to an illustration, and so your text should provide a variety of scenes, characters, or actions. You could think of this as writing 'captions' for the (not yet drawn) pictures.
- However, these 'captions' must flow, as for any other well-written story, and offer an intriguing beginning, a rousing middle, and a good, satisfying ending.
- You want your reader turning pages. Each picture book page should make the reader wonder, "What will happen next?"
- Dummy it up this is how you pace your picture book stories. Some writer-illustrators use a photo album numbered from page 1 to 32 or clear file folders. Skip to page 5 to start inserting your text, which you have divided evenly from page 5 to page 32.
- Now try to visualize a scene for each page. If you can't, you need to re-work the text until you can.
- Word choice is paramount. The language of children's picture books is both spare and rich. The average picture book is 3-7 typed, double-spaced pages.
- With so few words to develop a setting, character, and plot, each word counts! There is not much room for visual description - so most of that will be done by the illustrator.
- Choose words that are vivid, words with action, sensory words and words that are pleasing to the ear.

- Poetic devices work well in children's picture books- rhythm, alliteration, repetition, refrains, onomatopoeia, similes, rhymes and word play.
- Read your text out loud. Children's picture books are meant to be read out loud, so read them out loud as you are writing.
- Find an audience among your children, family member or critique group. Or read to your cat!
- Or you can record the story on a tape recorder and play it back. This helps you to listen to the rhythm, and to notice when sentences or words don't flow as smoothly as they should.
- Give each of your main characters one dominant trait. As in all good stories, main characters need to solve their problems on their own. Good stories emerge from character.
- As for plots, a good picture book plot, like a short story, builds to a climax. Even concept books often follow a story-line.
- Read as many picture books as you can, and as you read look out for plot patterns unique to them. Look for cumulative or chain plots, circular plots, question and answer formats, logical sequences, and time frame structures.
- As to themes, like all good books, good children's picture books need strong, universal themes.
- What does your story say? Is there a subtle (not preachy!), underlying message? Ideally, picture books give us something big, something of value to take away with us.