

Chapter 1

The Basics of Writing Children's Books

In This Chapter

- ▶ Defining the children's book world
 - ▶ Getting into the writing process
 - ▶ Creating a story that children clamor for
 - ▶ Polishing your book until it squeaks
 - ▶ Publishing and promoting your book
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For many, dreams of writing a children's book remain just that — dreams — because they soon find out that writing a really good children's book is *hard*. Not only that, but actually getting a children's book published is even harder. If you don't know the conventions and styles, if you don't speak the lingo, if you don't have someone to advocate for your work, or if you don't come across professionally, you'll be hard pressed to get your manuscript read and considered, much less published.

We wrote this book to help you as you go through the process of writing your children's book and getting it published. In many of the chapters, we provide insightful, candid interviews with publishing pros who answer common questions with incredible candor and honesty and, often, a great sense of humor.



Every bestselling children's book author started with a story idea — just like yours. Many of today's most successful writers were rejected time after time, until they finally found someone who liked what they saw and decided to take a chance. Follow your dreams. Never give up. When your children's book is published one day, we'll be cheering for you.

Knowing Your Format and Audience

Before you do anything else, figure out what kind of children's book you're writing (or want to write). Manuscripts are published in several tried-and-true formats, with new ones being developed every year. Formats involve the physical characteristics of a book: page count, trim size (width and height), whether it's color or black and white, has lots of pictures or lots of words, or is hardcover or softcover. There are also lots of genres your book may (or may not) fall into. So, figuring out your format and genre will help you determine exactly how to write your book — see Chapter 2 for more.



You also need to ask yourself: Who is my audience? Believe it or not, *children* isn't the correct answer. Children of a particular age bracket, say *newborn to age 2*, or *ages 3 to 8* may come closer to defining the target age you're trying to reach, but are they really the ones who buy your book? Because books are ushered through the process by grown-ups — edited by editors, categorized by publishers, pushed by sales reps, shelved and sold by booksellers, and most often purchased by parents and other adults — your audience is more complicated than you may think. In Chapter 3, we tell you all about the different people you need to impress before you get your book in the hands of children.

Getting to a Good Writing Zone

If you thought you could just grab a pen and paper and jump right in to writing, you're right! But you also may want to consider what will happen when your life starts to intrude on your writing time. How do you work around the children needing to be fed and your desk being buried under mounds of bills and old homework? How do you figure out when it's best to write? In Chapter 4, we talk about finding a space of your own for writing and making that space conducive to productivity and creativity. We also emphasize the importance of making a writing schedule and sticking to it.

After you figure out how to get to work, you have to decide what you're going to write about. Coming up with an interesting idea for a story isn't necessarily as easy as you may think. In Chapter 5, we provide lots of ways to boot up your idea factory and get you started. If you get stuck, we also have ways to get you unstuck.

As soon as you've got your good idea, you'll want to get out for a little bit and research. Every good book is built on a good idea and good research to make

sure the idea fits with the audience. We cover the hows and whys of researching your audience, of figuring out what children like and what is important in the lives, and then researching the topic itself in Chapter 6.

Transforming Yourself into a Storyteller

Children's books are all about great, memorable characters. Whether it's a child who can fly, a big, bad wolf, a boy and a slave floating down the Mississippi River, or a smelly green ogre, characters are the heart and soul of children's books. So how can you create characters who jump off the page and into your readers' hearts? And how do you make sure they have a supporting cast that does what they are supposed to do? In Chapter 7 we delve into how to build and flesh out great characters and how to avoid stereotyping and other typical pitfalls. We even add some exercises that help you practice your character-building skills.

What exactly is a plot, and how does one figure out what constitutes a beginning, a middle, and an end? And what the heck is a step sheet and will it help you structure your story? That's the territory of Chapter 8, where we talk about conflict, climax, and resolution and how to get started on that all-important first draft.

We then provide some tips and step-by-step advice for writing good dialogue for your characters to make sure that they sound as realistic (and as age appropriate) as you intended them to be. We also look at ways to keep them sounding different from one another. All that can be found in Chapter 9.

One way to engage young readers is to write about people they can relate to and set your story in places that intrigue them. We give you some pointers on how to really create interesting settings that ground your story in a particular context and draw in your reader in Chapter 10.

Many writers find joy in using words as their own little playthings (we know we do). Word play, rhyming, rhythm — the music inherent in words well matched — is indeed exciting to read and even more fun to write. Children delight in poetry and music. If you've forgotten just what makes a youngster giggle out of control, we use Chapter 11 to remind you what children of different ages find hilarious. We also discuss how to choose and stick to a consistent point of view while creating a tone that works for you.

We wrap up this section with an in-depth look at writing creative nonfiction (true) stories or a how-to book. Chapter 12 is chock-full of good advice on

jump-starting that nonfiction project by choosing a kid-friendly topic, organizing your ideas into a comprehensive outline or plan, and fleshing out your ideas with all the right research.

Polishing Your Gem and Getting It Ready to Send

After you've written your first (or tenth) draft, you may be ready for the rewriting or editing process. Rewriting and editing aren't just exercises to go through step-by-step; they are processes in which the writer gets to know his story inside and out. Characters are fleshed out, the story is honed and sharpened, the pacing is fine-tuned, and the writing is buffed and polished. In Chapter 13, we guide you through the steps of rewriting and editing, addressing in detail how to fix everything from dialogue issues to awkward writing, advising when to adhere to the rules of grammar (and when it's okay not to), and giving you a few simple questions to ask yourself that will make the process much smoother and less complicated. The chapter also gives you editing tips from the pros and tells you how they work with their writers to help them make their books the best they can be.

Perhaps you've been through the writing and rewriting and editing processes and are ready to push your duckling story out into the pond and see if she'll swim. Your work is about to encounter a lot of professional publishing folks, and first impressions carry a lot of weight. In Chapter 13, we also talk about how to format your work before you send it out, taking care to make it look as professional and enticing as possible.

And what about illustrations? Should you illustrate your book yourself or should you partner with or hire an illustrator to create the pictures you envision to complement and enhance your manuscript? The answers may surprise you. In Chapter 14, we address illustrations and illustrators, how to find them, and how to work with them.

Often in the process of rewriting and editing their work, writers find that they need another set of eyes to confirm (or reject) their thoughts about their manuscript. You may have general questions such as, "Is this really final or does it need work?" You may have specific questions about your characters or your storyline. To help you feel less alone, we include a chapter on joining the children's book writing community, whether you join (or start) a local writers' group, go to book writer's conferences, or go back to school. Chapter 15 gives you the scoop on feedback of all types. We want you to be aware of

what these specific events, venues, and services can and should offer you before you take the plunge and pull out your checkbook (or your typed and double-spaced manuscript).

Submitting, Selling, and Promoting Your Book

All dressed up and lots of places to go! What a marvelous place to be: You have a well-written, carefully edited, perfectly formatted manuscript that you are ready to launch on its first (or seventeenth) journey out into the big, bad world of agents and publishers. But what in the heck are you supposed to do next?

In Chapter 16, we talk about where you start looking for someone who will best represent your interests and do all the photocopying, cover-letter writing, submitting, tracking, and negotiating on your behalf. An *agent* can be a necessary and welcome addition to your family of writing supporters, and the good ones are well worth the 15 percent they typically charge to take your career from amateur to professional. Finding the right one, getting her attention, and then negotiating your contract is a process unto itself, and we've got your back to make sure you understand what you're getting yourself into.

Whether an agent is in your future or you decide to submit directly to the publishers yourself, you'll know what to do next when you read Chapter 17. Finding the right match and submitting only to the "right" publishing houses is an art form itself and requires in-depth research and quite a bit of sleuthing. We also provide tips on how to make yourself stand out from the pack with scintillating query letters and proposals that get you noticed. And if you choose to work with a packager instead, we talk you through the opportunities open to writers who seek packagers and licensors as publishing partners. When all your efforts pay off, and you're about to enter into a legal agreement with a publisher, you need to know which rights are most important to protect and what issues you need to negotiate before you sign and date your first publishing contract. Chapter 17 can help there, too.

Rejection hurts, no matter who you are or where you are in your publishing career. Yet why is it that some writers tell tales about getting rejected dozens of times and still manage to get published, while others send something out to one or two publishers and then toss their manuscript in a drawer to gather dust while they move on to another, less painful hobby? Developing a tough

hide isn't easy, but it's absolutely necessary when you're a writer. In Chapter 17, we offer ways of combating the rejection blues and moving onward and upward, including publishing your story yourself.

You may know what an editor does (sort of), but perhaps you have no idea how a book gets transformed from the stuff you pulled out of your printer into the lovely hardcover or softcover package you see sitting on the bookstore shelf. Who decides which illustrations will accompany your text, and how will the illustrator know what he's supposed to show on each page? What is the next process your beloved manuscript will now take? In Chapter 18, we let you in on where a manuscript goes once it's inside a publishing house.



Improving your chances of getting published

We've worked in the publishing industry for a long time, and we've got a pretty good idea of what works and what doesn't. Here are some insider tips that can significantly improve your chances of getting published. Some of these tips involve very specific advice, such as getting feedback before submitting, and less concrete (but just as important) tips about the etiquette of following up with publishers and how to behave if rejected.

Act like a pro. If you act like you're an experienced and savvy children's book writer, people perceive you as being an experienced and savvy children's book writer. And because the children's book industry tends to be more accepting of those people who already "belong to the club" than of the newbies pounding on the door to be let in, you'll greatly improve your chances of getting published by behaving as if you already belong. Some examples of this include sending a one-page query letter that addresses all the salient points, submitting your manuscript edited carefully, and formatting your manuscript properly (all discussed in Chapter 13).

Create magic with words. Writing a fabulous children's book isn't easy. Children's book editors have very finely tuned senses of what constitutes a well-written book and what will sell in the marketplace. If you want to get your book published, your writing must be top notch — second-best isn't good enough. If you're still learning the craft of writing, by all means engage the services of a professional children's book editor or book doctor to help fix up your manuscript before you submit it to a publisher for consideration — or get some reliable and knowledgeable feedback. Head to Chapter 13 for advice on hiring an editorial service and Chapter 15 for ways of getting additional good feedback.

Research thoroughly. To get published, your book needs to be both believable and factually correct (especially if you're writing nonfiction). If you're sloppy with the facts, your editor won't waste much time with your manuscript before it gets pitched in the round file. (Chapter 6 keeps you up on the latest developments in the world of children and ways to research your topic.)

Follow up — without stalking. After you submit your manuscript or proposal, expect to follow up with the agent or editor to whom you submitted it. But keep in mind that agents and editors are very busy people, and they probably receive hundreds of submissions every year. Be polite and persistent, but avoid stalking the agent or editor by constantly calling or e-mailing for status. Making a pest of yourself will buy you nothing except a one-way ticket out of the world of children's books. See Chapter 18 for more on when and how to follow up.

Accept rejection graciously. Every children's book author — even the most successful and famous — knows rejection and what it's like to wonder whether her book will ever be published. But every rejection provides you with important lessons to be applied to your next submission. Take these lessons to heart and move on to the next opportunity. Head to Chapter 18 for more on rejection.

Practice until you're perfect. There's no better way to succeed at writing than to write, and no better way to get better at submitting your manuscripts and proposals to agents or publishers than to submit. Don't let rejection get in the way of

your progress; keep writing and keep submitting. The more you do, the better you'll get at it — *it* being everything you discover in Parts II and III. And remember: Hope means always having a manuscript being considered somewhere.

Promote like crazy. Publishers love authors with a selling platform — that is, people who have the ability to publicize and promote their books as widely as possible. By showing your prospective publishers that you have the ability to promote your books — in the media, through your networks of relationships, and more — you'll greatly increase your chances of being published. (For more on promotion, see Chapters 19 and 21.)

Give back to the writing community. Pros give back to their profession, to their readers, and to their communities. They volunteer to participate in writing groups or conferences to help new or unpublished authors polish their work and get published; they do free readings in local schools and libraries; and they advocate for children in their communities. When you give back like a pro, you improve your standing in the children's book industry, which increases your chances of getting published. And besides all that, you establish some good karma, and that can't hurt.

After you have your book in your hand, how can you be sure anyone else ever will? Getting a book published is only part of the process toward success. And guess what? The efforts your publisher is planning on making on your behalf may not impress you. Delving into marketing and publicizing will make your book sell over the long run. In Chapter 19, we talk to publicity professionals who let us in on their secrets, and we give you lots of ideas of how to get your book noticed. Marketing, planning, and promotion take you from book signing to lecture — all starring you and your fabulous children's book.

So if you're ready to begin examining the process that all writers must enter, jump right in or tiptoe on over. We're ready for you.

