

Chapter 1

Exploring the Basics of Writing Children's Books

In This Chapter

- ▶ Defining the children's book world
 - ▶ Diving into the writing process
 - ▶ Creating a powerful story for children and polishing until it shines
 - ▶ Publishing your book and spreading the word
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For many, dreams of writing or illustrating 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 or your manuscript don't come across as professional, you'll be hard pressed to get your manuscript read and considered, much less published.

Consider this chapter your sneak peek into the world of children's publishing. We fill you in on the basics of children's book formats, creating a productive writing zone, employing key storytelling techniques, revising your manuscript, and getting your story into the hands of publishers who sell to the exact children's audience you're targeting.



Every bestselling children's book author started with a story idea — just like yours. Also, many of today's most successful writers were rejected time after time until they finally found someone who liked what he or she read or saw and decided to take a chance. Follow your dreams. Feed your passion. Never give up. The day your children's book is published, 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 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, is hardcover or softcover, comes as an e-book or an app — or both. 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 and present your book. Chapter 2 has lots of examples of published books that do a great job in each format.



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 *infant 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 — signed up by agents, acquired and 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 into 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 may also 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 the importance of making a writing schedule and sticking to it. We also emphasize finding a space of your own for writing and making that space conducive to productivity and creativity.

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, which is why we provide lots of ways to boot up your idea factory in Chapter 5. We also have ways to get you unstuck if you find yourself with a mysterious case of writer's block.

As soon as you have your good idea, it's time to get out there and research to make sure the idea fits your target audience. We cover the hows and whys of researching your audience, of figuring out what children like and what is important in their lives, and then researching the topic itself in Chapter 6.

Transforming Yourself into a Storyteller

By making sure your fiction story features these key elements, you'll be one step closer to publishing success:

- ✓ **Memorable characters:** Whether it's a child who can fly, a really hungry 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? Chapter 7 reveals how to build and flesh out great characters and how to avoid stereotyping and other common pitfalls.
- ✓ **An engaging plot:** What exactly is a plot, and how does one figure out what constitutes a beginning, a middle, and an ending? That's the territory of Chapter 8, as are conflict, climax, and resolution.
- ✓ **Realistic dialogue:** Kids can tell when dialogue doesn't sound right. This is why Chapter 9 features tips and step-by-step advice for writing realistic, age-appropriate dialogue for each of your characters. We also look at ways to keep your characters sounding different from one another.
- ✓ **Interesting settings:** One way to engage young readers is to set your story in places that intrigue them. We give you some pointers on how to create interesting settings that ground your story in a particular context and draw in your reader in Chapter 10.

Of course, you also need to consider your author voice or *tone*. Do you want to sound playful by incorporating word play, rhyming, and rhythm (the music inherent in words well matched)? Or do you want to make youngsters giggle uncontrollably? We give you the tools you need to create your character's voice in Chapter 11. And if you're struggling with sticking to a consistent point of view, Chapter 11 can help you out there, too.



Interested in writing nonfiction? Then turn to Chapter 12. It's chock-full of good advice on jump-starting your 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 revising or editing process. Revising 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 revising 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 to make the process much smoother and less complicated.

In the process of rewriting and editing your story, you may find that you have some serious questions about your manuscript, such as “Is this really final, or does it need work?” or “Is this supporting character turning into more of a distraction than anything else?” Seek out feedback from others to help you find answers to any and all questions you may be asking. You can join (or start) a local writer's group, attend book conferences or writing workshops, or participate in writing message boards. For the full scoop on all things feedback-related, see Chapter 15.



In the publishing world, first impressions carry a lot of weight. Your thoroughly revised, well-written, and engaging manuscript may fail to wow editors if it looks unprofessional. Trust us: Proper formatting goes a long way toward making your submission look as professional and enticing as possible. (Flip to Chapter 13 for some formatting tips.)

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? For writers wondering about whether art should be included with their manuscript, we give you the pros and cons of partnering with an illustrator. For those with artistic talent to pair with their writing skills, Chapter 14 also provides step-by-step examples of what illustrating a picture book really looks like.

Selling Your Story

After you have a well written, carefully edited, perfectly formatted manuscript in your hands, you're ready to launch it on its first (or 17th) journey out into the big, bad world of publishing. At this point in the process, you have a few different options:

- ✓ You can send your manuscript to an *agent*, a person who will best represent your interests and do all the photocopying, query-letter writing, submitting, tracking, and negotiating on your behalf. 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, which is why we tell you all about that in Chapter 16.

- ✔ You can submit your book to publishers on your own. Finding the right match and submitting to only the “right fit” publishing houses is an art form requiring in-depth research and quite a bit of sleuthing. Turn to Chapter 17 for advice on finding the publisher who’s looking for stories just like yours, as well as how to get what you want in your contract.
- ✔ You can opt out of the submissions game altogether and choose to publish your book all by yourself. Chapter 18 introduces you to the world of self-publishing, offering you tips, options, and guidelines about how and where to start with print or digital versions of your book.

Promoting Your Book

After you have your finished book or its actual publication date, how can you be sure anyone else will ever see it or buy it? If you’re working with a traditional publisher, that company likely has a marketing team dedicated to spreading the word about your book, but you know what? The efforts your publisher is planning on making on your behalf may not impress you, which means you need to do some marketing and publicizing of your own if you want your book sell over the long run. Don’t worry, though. Publicity professionals let you in on their secrets in Chapter 19, 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.



Unless you’ve been living under a rock, you’re probably aware that social media has become a powerful force in promoting everything from products and politics to — you guessed it — children’s books. Chapter 20 explains how to use social media (including Facebook, Twitter, and blogs) to introduce your book to the world, alert potential buyers to its existence, and keep it in the public consciousness long after its release date.

Improving your chances of getting published

We’ve worked in the publishing industry for a long time, and we have 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; others provide 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 — provided you’ve really done your research. And because

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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, how to submit your carefully and thoroughly edited manuscript, and formatting your manuscript properly (discussed in Chapters 13 and 16).

Create magic with words. Writing a fabulous children's book isn't easy. A children's book editor has a very finely tuned sense 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 get some reliable and knowledgeable feedback. And you might even choose to 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. Whichever avenue(s) you choose, the goal is putting your best effort forward.

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 pitching it in the trash. (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 if not thousands 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 Chapters 16 and 17 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 get 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 17 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 keep trying. 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 20.)

Give back to the writing community. Both beginners and 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, increasing your chances of getting published. And besides all that, you establish some good karma — and that can't hurt.