

## IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Defining the children's book world
- » Diving into the writing process
- » Creating a powerful story for children and tweaking until it's perfect
- » Publishing your book and spreading the word

# Chapter 1

# Exploring the Basics of Writing Children's Books

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.



REMEMBER

Every bestselling children's book author started from the beginning: with a story idea — just like you. Also, many of today's most successful writers were rejected time after time until they finally found someone who liked what they 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, Genre, and Audience

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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 has color or is in 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. Chapter 2 gives a thorough explanation of what's what in formats.

Also, your book may (or may not) fall into a lot of different genres. *Genres* are broad subjects, like mystery or adventure or romance. So figuring out your format and genre can help you determine exactly how to write and present your book. Chapter 3 has a lot of examples of genres that can help guide you in your writing journey.



REMEMBER

You 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, librarians, and other adults — your audience is more complicated than you may think. In Chapter 4, 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

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If you think you can just grab a pen and paper or handy-dandy laptop and jump right into writing, you're right! But you may also want to consider what might 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 the best time to write? In Chapter 5, 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 a lot of ways to boot up your idea factory in Chapter 6. We also have ways to get you unstuck if you find yourself with an annoying case of writer's block.

As soon as you have your good idea, you need 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, figuring out what children like and what they see as important in their lives, and then researching the topic itself in Chapter 7.

## Transforming Yourself into a Storyteller

By making sure your fiction story features these key elements, you can get yourself 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 8 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 do you figure out what constitutes a beginning, a middle, and an ending? We answer that question in Chapter 9, as well as defining conflict, climax, and resolution.
- » **Realistic dialogue:** Kids can tell when dialogue doesn't sound right. Chapter 10 features tips and step-by-step advice for writing realistic, age-appropriate dialogue for each of your characters. We also look at ways to make sure your characters sound different from one another.
- » **Interesting settings:** One way to engage young readers is to set your story in places that intrigue them. In Chapter 11, we give you some pointers on how to create interesting settings and build worlds that ground your story in a particular context and draw in your reader.

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 12. And if you're struggling with sticking to a consistent point of view, Chapter 12 can help you out there, too.



Interested in writing nonfiction? Then turn to Chapter 13. 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 write 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 you, the writer, get to know your story inside and out. You flesh out characters, hone and sharpen the story, fine-tune the pacing, and buff and polish the writing. In Chapter 14, 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.

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 15 also provides step-by-step examples of what illustrating a picture book really looks like.

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 groups online. For the full scoop on all things feedback-related, see Chapter 16.



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 14 for some formatting tips.)

# 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 20th) journey out into the big, bad world of publishing. Chapter 17 explains

- » the difference between the big, traditional publishers and smaller presses or independents
- » the pros and cons of working with a hybrid or vanity publisher
- » the option of self-publishing

At this point in the process, you have a few different options:

- » **Agents:** You can send your manuscript to an *agent*, a person who will best represent your interests and do all 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 their attention, and then negotiating your contract is a process unto itself, which we tell you all about in Chapter 18.
- » **Traditional publishers:** You can submit your book to traditional 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 18 for advice on finding the traditional publisher who's looking for stories just like yours, as well as how to get what you want in your contract.
- » **Hybrids:** You can go to a hybrid publisher who can help you out with the process. Chapter 19 digs deep into hybrid publishing, including what to expect and what to look out for.
- » **Self-publishing:** You can opt out of the submissions game altogether and choose to publish your book all by yourself. Chapter 20 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 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 to be honest, the efforts that your publisher is planning on your behalf may not impress you — and may not even be enough to get the word out. So you might need to do some marketing and publicizing of your own if you want your book to sell. Don't worry, though. Publicity professionals let you in on their secrets in Chapter 21, and we give you a lot of ideas about 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.



TIP

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 22 explains how to use social media (including blogs, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and more) 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. The children's book industry tends to be more accepting of those people who already belong to the club, so to speak, as compared to the newbies pounding on the door to be let in. So you can greatly improve your chances of getting published if you behave like you already belong. Some examples of putting yourself out there as a pro include sending a one-page query letter that addresses all the salient points, submitting your carefully and thoroughly edited manuscript, and formatting your manuscript properly. (All of these tips are discussed in Chapters 14 and 18).

- » **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. Check out other writers' guides, as well. 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 an agent or 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 deleting it from their inbox. (Chapter 7 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, you might want to follow up with the agent or editor to whom you submitted it. Sometimes, however, you actually need to avoid a follow-up. Many publishers and agents now reply to a query with the admonition that if they don't get back to you within three to six months, you can assume that they have rejected your work. 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, but avoid stalking the agent or editor by constantly calling or e-mailing for the status of your submission. Making a pest of yourself buys 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 their book will ever get published. But every rejection provides you with important lessons that you can apply to your next submission. Take these lessons to heart and move on to the next opportunity. Head to Chapter 18 for more on dealing with rejection.
- » **Practice until you're perfect.** You can't find a better way to succeed at writing than to write, and you can't get better at submitting your manuscripts and proposals to agents or publishers unless you 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 the elements of the writing process itself, which we discuss in Parts 2 and 3 of this book. And remember: Hope means always having a manuscript being considered somewhere.

- » **Promote like crazy.** Publishers love authors with a *selling platform* —defined as the ability to publicize, promote, and sell their books as widely as possible. By showing your prospective publishers that you have the ability to promote and sell your books — via social media; by way of workshops or speaking engagements, in traditional media such as radio, TV, and local newspapers; through your networks of relationships; and more — you greatly increase your chances of being published. (For more on promotion, see Chapters 21 and 22.)
- » **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.