

THE BEST OF THE *CHILDREN'S WRITING* *UPDATE*



Presented by Children's Book Insider,
the Newsletter for Children's Writers

CHILDREN'S BOOK INSIDER, LLC
901 COLUMBIA ROAD
FORT COLLINS, CO 80525-1938
970/495-0056 MAIL@WRITE4KIDS.COM
[HTTP://WRITE4KIDS.COM](http://WRITE4KIDS.COM)

THE BEST OF THE *CHILDREN'S WRITING* *UPDATE*

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Children's Book Insider, LLC
901 Columbia Rd
Fort Collins, CO 80525

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Need Help? We've Got Solutions...

- Need insider secrets and fresh markets for your manuscript? Check out Children's Book Insider, the Newsletter for Children's Writers at <http://write4kids.com/aboutcbi.html>
- Just getting started and need a friendly, step-by-step guide to becoming a children's author? Check out Career Starter, The Beginner's Guide to Writing for Children at <http://write4kids.com/starter.html>
- Have you written a story but don't know what to do next? I've Written a Story, What Do I Do Now? tells you what you need to know about submitting your manuscript to publishers efficiently and professionally. <http://write4kids.com/nowwhat.html>
- Tired of getting rejection letters? Improving The Odds reveals the manuscript-revision secrets of top authors that help push them over the top. <http://write4kids.com/odds.html>
- Need to know how to write a killer query or cover letter that gets noticed? Author to Editor collects actual letters used by top authors that resulted in publishing contracts. Full analysis and lots of easy-to-apply tips help make writing the perfect query or cover letter a breeze. <http://write4kids.com/a2e.html>
- Having trouble developing a plot? Crafting strong characters? Coming up with good story ideas? Our In-Depth Workshop Series goes in-depth to make you a stronger and more confident writer. <http://write4kids.com/indepth.html>
- Care to hear—first-hand—the best advice superstar authors have to give for aspiring children's writers? In Their Own Words offers exclusive insight from Lois Lowry, Judy Blume, R.L. Stine, Chris Crutcher and many, many more. This is pure gold and available nowhere else. <http://write4kids.com/itow.html>

And there's more. For a full listing, just go to <http://write4kids.com/collect.html>

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Excellent Resource for Locating Great Books	5
A Fun (and Very Useful) Writing Exercise	5
A Simple—and Marvelous—Way To Kickstart Your Creativity	6
A Write4Kids Exclusive: Advice from the Legendary Lois Lowry!	6
Answers to Common Questions	6
Answers to Common Questions: Books with Toys	8
Answers to Common Questions: Picture Book Artwork	9
Answers to Common Questions: Picture Book Series	10
Ask a Children’s Librarian	10
Banned Books Week	19
Building a Story, Chapter by Chapter by Laura Backes	20
A Crash Course in Submitting a Manuscript by Laura Backes	22
Using Slang In Your Writing by Laura Backes	23
Crafting Great Beginnings by Laura Backes	25
The Four Questions of Character, by Laura Backes	27
Jumpstart Your Career by Asking “Why?” by Laura Backes	28
Flip Your Plot and Surprise Your Readers by Laura Backes	30
Learn from the Masters by Laura Backes	32
Creating Characters for Older Readers by Laura Backes	34
Page-Turning Picture Books by Laura Backes	35
Killer Query Letters that Work by Laura Backes	37
Should You Copyright Your Work? by Laura Backes	39
Do You Need An Agent? by Laura Backes	40
Rules You Can (Sometimes) Break by Laura Backes	42
Sell Your Work to Magazines by Laura Backes	43
Three Steps to Mastering the Market by Laura Backes	44
Three Ways to Add Tension to Your Story by Laura Backes	46
The Fine Art of Plotting by Laura Backes	47
Writing for Magazines by Laura Backes	48
Turn Your Ideas Into Books by Laura Backes	51
Your Real Odds of Getting Published by Laura Backes	53
Cool Tool: Kids’ Magazine Writers	54
Exclusive Free eBook for Updaters - “The Art of Writing”	55
Free Article Search Tool	55
Google Print Now Online	56
Great Resource for Writers of Jewish Books	56
Health Insurance Tips for Writers	57
Help for Young Writers	57
How Find Publishers for Your Manuscripts	58
How to Contact Almost Any Celebrity	59
Incredible Resource Gives Insight About Your Audience	59
New Website Gives Children’s Books to Kids Worldwide	60
Now It’s Easy To Tell a Friend About the Update	60
Online Booklists That Save Countless Hours	60
Online Resources for Children’s Writers	61
Plagued by Spyware and Adware?	64
Resource Alert: Disability in Children’s Books	65
Thinking About Self-Publishing a Children’s Picture Book?	65
Want to Reach Homeschoolers? Here’s One Way	66
We’ve Got a Very Cool Gift For You!	66
What Do Editors Want?	67

Excellent Resource for Locating Great Books

Reference librarian Lisa R. Bartle has created a resource of immeasurable usefulness to children's writers—and anyone else who cares about literature for kids. The Database of Award-Winning Children's Literature offers over 4,000 records from 50 major children's book awards across five English-speaking countries. Want to find a young adult novel set in the 18th century that's won an award? A pre-school book with a female, African-American protagonist that's been honored? No problem—the database makes such searches a breeze.

Here's how this tool can be powerful for writers: If you're working on a story, go to the database and find honored books that have similar settings, age-group targets, characters, etc. Then, go to your library or bookstore and examine these award-winning books closely. You'll have an instant insight into not only what makes a book well-received, but what makes your specific type of book a winner.

Great stuff! Go to <http://www.dawcl.com> and check it out.

A Fun (and Very Useful) Writing Exercise

Here's a fun, quick writing exercise to get your creative juices flowing:

Try re-telling a classic fairy tale or folktale from the perspective of a minor or even previously non-existent character. What did the next-door neighbor think about what was going on inside the home of Cinderella and her evil stepsisters? What was the town's sheriff's take on the ongoing feud between the Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf? How did Grumpy feel about all the singing and glad tidings taking place among Snow White and the other six dwarves?

The lesson: even if you're interested in telling a story that others have told, you can still present it in a fresh and new way by changing the perspective a bit!

A Simple—and Marvelous—Way To Kickstart Your Creativity

The folks at oneword.com have a simple proposition. They post a new word every day, and you have 60 seconds to write whatever pops into your mind after seeing the word. You can then read what others have written about the word. This is an amazingly powerful writing exercise, and highly instructive as you read the writings of others. Some are literal definitions, others are wild flights of fantasy triggered by often mundane words. Where does your writing fit in?

In its modest way, a site like this really demonstrates what the web can be all about.

Go check it out at <http://oneword.com>

A Write4Kids Exclusive: Advice from the Legendary Lois Lowry!

A few years back, we invited our readers to ask questions of one of the most important children's writers of our time, Lois Lowry (*The Giver*, *Anastasia Krupnik* and many, many others). The results were published as part of our book *In Their Own Words: The Best of CBI's Interviews*.

In honor of the American Library Association's "Banned Books Week", we wanted to share the thoughts of Ms. Lowry (who wrote the book—*The Giver*—that's #14 on the ALA's list of *The 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books*) with everyone. So, we're making Ms. Lowry's Q & A available to all. Ms. Lowry has some remarkable things to say, including her thoughts about the one thing she'd like to change about *The Giver*!

Check it out now at <http://write4kids.com/lowry.html>

Answers to Common Questions

We get lots of e-mails from writers with questions, and we do our best to answer as many as possible. Starting with this issue of the Update, we'll be printing these Q & As from time to time. Here's a sampling of some common questions, along with responses from Children's Book Insider Editor Laura Backes....

Q: What are the qualities that make a memorable picture book?

A: Many things make a picture book memorable. Well-defined characters with which young children can identify, and who have a problem or goal that young children can understand and find important. A well-paced plot that inspires the child to turn the page and see what happens next. Lyrical, rhythmic text that

sounds appealing when read out loud. Engaging illustrations that contain details not found in the text, and also add another layer to the story. And finally, an original, imaginative story that the child, parent and editor haven't seen before!

If you think about your favorite books from your own childhood, they are probably stories that made you feel something: wonder, joy, excitement, surprise, or even sadness. Those stories that speak directly to a child's emotions are always the most memorable.

Q: I am considering submitting to a publisher who requests a cover letter, full manuscript and information on my personal/professional background. Would this personal/professional info. be included in a cover letter or in a resume? Also, I don't have recent professional experience as I am currently a homemaker. Do I state this or only include my previous professional experience (which does not relate to writing though does relate to children)?

The personal/professional information would be presented in a short paragraph in your cover letter. Any professional experience that relates to writing or children can be included. If you were formerly a teacher, for example, that's relevant. If you've been published but it was for the adult market, I believe you can still include that information in your cover letter. However, if you're unpublished but a member of a writing organization such as the Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators, this information would be of interest to an editor. If you're without experience, don't worry about it. Simply skip this paragraph.

Want to see more Q&As? Go to <http://write4kids.com/asklaura.html>

Need Help? We've Got Solutions...

- Need insider secrets and fresh markets for your manuscript? Check out Children's Book Insider, the Newsletter for Children's Writers at <http://write4kids.com/aboutcbi.html>
- Just getting started and need a friendly, step-by-step guide to becoming a children's author? Check out Career Starter, The Beginner's Guide to Writing for Children at <http://write4kids.com/starter.html>
- Have you written a story but don't know what to do next? I've Written a Story, What Do I Do Now? tells you what you need to know about submitting your manuscript to publishers efficiently and professionally. <http://write4kids.com/nowwhat.html>

- Tired of getting rejection letters? Improving The Odds reveals the manuscript-revision secrets of top authors that help push them over the top. <http://write4kids.com/odds.html>
- Need to know how to write a killer query or cover letter that gets noticed? Author to Editor collects actual letters used by top authors that resulted in publishing contracts. Full analysis and lots of easy-to-apply tips help make writing the perfect query or cover letter a breeze. <http://write4kids.com/a2e.html>
- Having trouble developing a plot? Crafting strong characters? Coming up with good story ideas? Our In-Depth Workshop Series goes in-depth to make you a stronger and more confident writer. <http://write4kids.com/indepth.html>
- Care to hear—first-hand—the best advice superstar authors have to give for aspiring children’s writers? In Their Own Words offers exclusive insight from Lois Lowry, Judy Blume, R.L. Stine, Chris Crutcher and many, many more. This is pure gold and available nowhere else. <http://write4kids.com/itow.html>

And there’s more. For a full listing, just go to <http://write4kids.com/collect.html>

Answers to Common Questions: Books with Toys

We get lots of e-mails from writers with questions, and we do our best to answer as many as possible. Here’s a very common question, along with a response from Children’s Book Insider Editor Laura Backes....

I have an idea for a toy to be packaged with my book. How do I explain this to an editor?

Most book-and-merchandise packages are created after the book itself has gained a wide audience. Picture books alone are very expensive to produce, and an editor won’t want to spend even more money on a product that doesn’t have a proven sales record (not to mention that consumers won’t want to pay for a book and toy unless they already know and love the story). So, I’d hold off on mentioning the teddy bear prototype you stitched up until after your book has at least sold out its first printing.

One exception: There are some mass market publishers and book packagers (companies who create books and series for publishers) who have lines of books with related merchandise. These are often nonfiction books (crafts, activities, science projects, etc.), books for very young children (small stuffed animals accompany the book), or book-and-cassette packages. Again, looking through book stores to find these publishers and then sending for writer’s guidelines is your best bet.

Want to see more Q and As? Go to <http://write4kids.com/asklaura.html>

Answers to Common Questions: Picture Book Artwork

We get lots of e-mails from writers with questions, and we do our best to answer as many as possible. Starting with this issue of the Update, we'll be printing these Q and As from time to time. Here's a very common question, along with a response from Children's Book Insider Editor Laura Backes....

Q: How do I let an editor know what the pictures should look like if I don't plan on illustrating the book?

This is probably the most frequently asked question about picture books. Basically, the answer is, you don't. Most publishers do not want the authors to have input into the illustrations; in fact, there's rarely any communication between author and illustrator until after the book is finished.

There are two reasons for this: First, the words themselves should imply strong visual images. However, the words should not describe every detail the illustrator will draw, such as what color shirt the character is wearing, unless it's vital to the story. Instead, an editor must be able to read just the text and get enough information to imagine the characters and events of the book.

Secondly, a picture book is really a story told on two levels: words and pictures. The artist must be free to elaborate upon the text and add another dimension to the story with the illustrations. If the author places constraints on this freedom by dictating the pictures (and possibly missing some elements of the visual story because the author has a very specific idea of how the art should look), the book might not be as good. Authors need to trust that editors will pick artists who can do justice to the story.

If it's absolutely necessary for the author to describe an illustration (for example, the punch line of the book is shown through a picture rather than words), then the author can briefly note the illustration in the appropriate place on the manuscript, set off by parentheses.

Want to see more Q and As? Go to <http://write4kids.com/asklaura.html>

Answers to Common Questions: Picture Book Series

We get lots of e-mails from writers with questions, and we do our best to answer as many as possible. Here's a very common question, along with a response from Children's Book Insider Editor Laura Backes....

How do I present a picture book manuscript that I want to turn into a series with continuing characters?

Most fiction picture book series happen sort of by accident. The author writes one book, the characters catch on, and the publisher asks the author to create more titles with the same characters. Each book stands alone; in other words, children don't have to be familiar with the first book in the "series" to enjoy later titles. Two examples are the "Max and Ruby" board books by Rosemary Wells, and the "Martha" books by Susan Meddaugh. There are a few publishers who do series of books right off the bat (often with characters who teach concepts or lessons to toddlers), and you can look through book stores to see who these publishers are and then send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the editorial department for writer's guidelines. One clue is that the series are built around a theme, such as discovering the outdoors or learning shapes and colors.

If you're not submitting to a publisher who is specifically asking for series ideas, then send only one manuscript at a time. Don't even mention that you have others in the works involving the same characters until you've make the first sale.

Want to see more Q and As? Go to <http://write4kids.com/asklaura.html>

Ask a Children's Librarian

Last month, we introduced you to children's librarians Leigh Burnham and Vicki Fisher, two dedicated pros who have graciously offered to answer your questions about the children's book field.

Leigh and Vicki have been busy providing wonderful insight and, this month, we're happy to begin sharing their responses to your questions:

Q: In trying to get my children's stories printed I find a wealth of confusion in choosing what size the final book should be. Can you help at all? Is there a size that the children prefer? What is more appealing to them, bigger? smaller? Square? Rectangular? Thanks for considering my question, Annette

Dear Writer:

It has been my experience that children like books of every shape and size. I heard that Beatrix Potter thought the small format of her books was best for small hands, but that's not necessarily true. Lucy Cousins' recent book *Maisy's Rainbow Dream* measures an impressive 14"x11" and is presently one of the most popular books at the library. *Leonardo's Horse* by Jean Fritz is rounded at the top, and there are board books and novelty books of every conceivable shape! However, unless there is a reason for the book to be unusually shaped, I'd stick with an average rectangular or square picture book.

Of course, if you are a writer (not an illustrator), and you sell your story to a publishing company, you won't really have any say in the form the book will take. It will be in the hands of the illustrator, editor, designer, etc. to determine the ultimate appearance of the book.

Happy Writing!
The Children's Librarian

*Hi,
If you are an author wanting to market your book, what is the best way to approach the library market?
Thank you,
Pamela T.*

Dear Writer,

Librarians usually select books based on reviews in professional journals such as *Horn Book*, *The Bulletin*, *Booklist*, *Publisher's Weekly*, and *School Library Journal*. Editors and publicists are generally responsible for sending the book (often a pre-publication copy) for review. A writer needs to be educated about these journals, and each is different. One will publish positive and negative reviews, another publishes only positive reviews, and yet another will only review books from publishers listed in *Literary Market Place*. It is extremely rare for a self-published book to be reviewed. Ask your local children's librarian if you may peruse his/her copies, as they will not be found in the general periodical section of the library.

Other thoughts on promotional possibilities:

- Look up the web site of your state and national library associations to learn about their reading lists and awards, then send a copy of your book to the appropriate committee.

- Learn about and attend state and national library conferences as these can offer speaking and signing opportunities for authors.
- Develop a program that you are willing to present at schools and libraries for free and ask just for the opportunity to sell and sign books afterward.
- Send your local library a free copy of your book.
- Send out postcards, brochures, or mailings about your book (and program, if applicable).
- Look at some of the numerous volumes on promoting your own book.

Happy Writing!

Have a question for the librarians? Just send them to askthelibrarian@hotmail.com, and Leigh and Vicki will select some each month to answer. Their responses will appear in the Update and on our website, Write4Kids.com.

Ask questions about current trends, what kids are asking for, common mistakes in children's books, or whatever else you'd like to know about. These ladies are sure to have an opinion that will enrich your writing career.

Please note—Leigh and Vicky can't answer every question, and they can't reply personally. Also, please be aware that your question, and the librarian's response, will be included in the e-zine and posted online for all to see, so don't include anything you'd like to be kept "secret". Be sure to indicate whether you want your full name attached to your question, or just your first name.

Once again, the e-mail is askthelibrarian@hotmail.com

It's time to once again visit with children's librarians Leigh Burnham and Vicki Fisher, two dedicated pros who have graciously offered to answer your questions about the children's book field.

I am a special ed. teacher. Last school year, I worked on rewriting the information found in the students' textbook to bring it to the appropriate reading level of my students. I did this using presentation software and added many interesting pictures that they could relate to, as well as, questions appropriate to their level. Do you think a publisher would be interested in looking at what I have done? Where do I start looking for them?

What you've done thus far is edit someone else's book; you haven't researched and written your own book, so you can't sell it as such. You also need to be cautious about copyright when adding pictures. I recommend that you either approach the publisher of that particular textbook about doing a lower level edition, or that you start fresh on your own independently researched book on the same topic.

I am writing non-fiction for middle-grade children. My question is regarding the accompanying illustration for this book (loosely) about wild animals and the work of naturalists in preserving them. From my days in the library I recall that children seem to prefer photographs to illustrative art in their non-fiction choices. Is that still true? A photographer has accompanied me on my field excursions with the naturalists and obtained some good photos. Maybe I should include photocopies of a couple of them, along with the book proposal I'm currently sending out. What do you say?

I agree that color photographs are preferable in non-fiction books, and I think it would be a good idea to enclose copies of a few photos in your proposal since they were specifically taken to accompany your text.

I was wondering even if a story is interesting, how long should a chapter be? Or will a child read right to the end as long as he/she is kept interested?

There is no requisite chapter length. If you are interested in an average chapter length for whatever level of fiction you are writing, go to the library and look at some of the books on the same level as yours. You could use that as a guideline, but remember that there are no magic formulas, word count, subject matter, or page length that guarantee success. That is dependent upon the author's imagination and skill.

Happy Writing!

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Ask questions about current trends, what kids are asking for, common mistakes in children's books, or whatever else you'd like to know about. These ladies are sure to have an opinion that will enrich your writing career.

Please note—Leigh and Vicky can't answer every question, and they can't reply personally. Also, please be aware that your question, and the librarian's response, will be included in the e-zine and posted online for all to see, so don't include anything you'd like to be kept "secret".

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It's time to once again visit with children's librarians Leigh Burnham and Vicki Fisher, two dedicated pros who have graciously offered to answer your questions about the children's book field.

My agent tells me middle grade fiction is a hard sell right now, but I've received opposite opinions from other publishing professionals. How do you feel about the current market for middle grade? Thanks.

Beginning chapter books for 2nd and 3rd graders seem to be really popular right now, but mid-grade fiction is still significant in the market. After all, most Newbery winners and honor books are mid-grade.

I read somewhere that children look for the talking parts in a story. Is it possible to write a successful story for ages around 5-8 hardly has any talking in it, or would it be too flat?

Ages five to eight covers a lot of territory, from beginning readers to full-length chapter books. With that in mind, I think you could write a reader without dialogue, but I don't think you could write a chapter book without dialogue. I would recommend that you include at least some amount of dialogue in your story, as it is such a useful literary tool to develop characters and to advance the plot.

What is the hot topic in young adult novels?

The hot topics are: pop music, religion and the afterlife, sex and relationships (including gay and lesbian issues), spies and adventure, and technology.

Happy Writing!

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I have great success telling stories to children, especially 5 to 10-year-olds, usually making them up as I go along. Most have continuing characters and deal with nature—creatures, giant birds, pits, caves, strange noises, etc. Occasionally I have tried to write such stories out, but they seem flat—maybe dependent on voice inflection, etc., to work.

Are there real differences between stories that TELL well and those that read well?

Being a good storyteller and being a good writer are two distinct talents. Some people possess one or the other and some possess both. Both take skill and imagination, but the challenge of writing is that the words have to stand on their own, with a clarity and richness that don't require further inflection, expression, and elaboration. These must come through in the text and that is no small feat! August House has published storytelling books and a few picture books by well-known storyteller Margaret Read MacDonald. Ms. MacDonald also has audio recordings of her stories. See if your library has any of these (or request them through inter-library loan) and compare them.

What do you think is the most common mistake that an author makes in writing for children?

When verse is bad, it's really bad. But when it's good, children love it, and I love to read it aloud in storytime. Go to the library and read some books by Mary Ann Hoberman to get a sense of just how good verse can be (and how good it should

be if you are submitting it to publishers). And remember that rhythm is just as important as rhyme!

Why are publishers so afraid to publish picture books/young readers with a moral message? I know that if it sounds too preachy, kids won't like it. I can understand that. But, I personally think we NEED to emphasize right and wrong and good morals, etc. I have two picture book manuscripts dealing with important topics like world peace and pollution. Publishers are saying, so far, that they are a bit too didactic.

The challenge is to write a book with a message that doesn't sound condescending and doesn't directly come out of the mouth of an adult character. I think many books have moral messages, but they are subtle. There are some books with overt morals, even some that print the moral on the cover, such as the Serendipity books by Stephen Cosgrove, and the Sommer-Time books by Carl Sommer, but large companies don't publish these. I would suggest looking outside the mainstream for publishers or embedding the message into the actions of the characters rather than stating it overtly.

Happy Writing!

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Ask questions about current trends, what kids are asking for, common mistakes in children's books, or whatever else you'd like to know about. These ladies are sure to have an opinion that will enrich your writing career.

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Once again, the e-mail is askthelibrarian@hotmail.com

Need Help? We've Got Solutions...

- Need insider secrets and fresh markets for your manuscript? Check out Children's Book Insider, the Newsletter for Children's Writers at <http://write4kids.com/aboutcbi.html>
- Just getting started and need a friendly, step-by-step guide to becoming a children's author? Check out Career Starter, The Beginner's Guide to Writing for Children at <http://write4kids.com/starter.html>
- Have you written a story but don't know what to do next? I've Written a Story, What Do I Do Now? tells you what you need to know about submitting your manuscript to publishers efficiently and professionally. <http://write4kids.com/nowwhat.html>
- Tired of getting rejection letters? Improving The Odds reveals the manuscript-revision secrets of top authors that help push them over the top. <http://write4kids.com/odds.html>
- Need to know how to write a killer query or cover letter that gets noticed? Author to Editor collects actual letters used by top authors that resulted in publishing contracts. Full analysis and lots of easy-to-apply tips help make writing the perfect query or cover letter a breeze. <http://write4kids.com/a2e.html>
- Having trouble developing a plot? Crafting strong characters? Coming up with good story ideas? Our In-Depth Workshop Series goes in-depth to make you a stronger and more confident writer. <http://write4kids.com/indepth.html>
- Care to hear—first-hand—the best advice superstar authors have to give for aspiring children's writers? In Their Own Words offers exclusive insight from Lois Lowry, Judy Blume, R.L. Stine, Chris Crutcher and many, many more. This is pure gold and available nowhere else. <http://write4kids.com/itow.html>

And there's more. For a full listing, just go to <http://write4kids.com/collect.html>

It's time to once again visit with children's librarians Leigh Burnham and Vicki Fisher, two dedicated pros who have graciously offered to answer your questions about the children's book field.

In the library, do children prefer to read easy readers or picture books? Which do they check out more frequently? Which do parents prefer?

Dear Writer,

The decision to read picture books or easy readers is usually not determined by preference, but by the purpose of the reading. If the children are emergent readers specifically working on that skill, they will read easy readers, as that is their purpose. If parents are reading aloud to younger children, they will read picture books. There are also picture books with longer text written for older children, such as *The Stinky Cheese Man* by Jon Scieszka and *A Bad Case of Stripes* by David Shannon. Picture books and readers all circulate extremely well, though the picture book collection is much larger than the reader collection.

What would you say are three qualities children (ages 6-9) most relate to in a book?

A character to whom they can relate, a well-paced plot interjected with humor, and a clear, just, and satisfying resolution.

Read your very interesting article in the "Write4kids.com". We are ready to self-publish a 22-page illustrated children's book and are wondering if it is important for a book this size to have a spine- so that the title, etc can be read as it stands on the shelf. It seems that the books that are folded and stapled only are generally part of an inexpensive series. We would appreciate your valuable feedback.

I agree that a glued binding is better than saddle-stapled. However, if you're targeting the library market, please be aware that most libraries' collection development policies prevent them from purchasing paperback picture books. That's why there are companies that strip books of the original publisher's binding (paperback and trade hardcover) and re-bind the books into heavy-duty editions that are then sold to libraries. Issues of durability are important to libraries, as we don't want to spend our limited budgets on replacements.

Happy Writing!

Have a question for the librarians? Just send them to askthelibrarian@hotmail.com, and Leigh and Vicki will select some each month to answer. Their responses will be appear in the Update and on our website, Write4Kids.com.

Ask questions about current trends, what kids are asking for, common mistakes in children's books, or whatever else you'd like to know about. These ladies are sure to have an opinion that will enrich your writing career.

Please note—Leigh and Vicky can't answer every question, and they can't reply personally. Also, please be aware that your question, and the librarian's response, will be included in the e-zine and posted online for all to see, so don't include anything you'd like to be kept "secret".

Once again, the e-mail is askthelibrarian@hotmail.com

Banned Books Week

The American Library Association (ALA) is urging Americans to "Elect to Read a Banned Book," in honor of this year's Banned Books Week, September 25 to October 2.

Observed since 1982, the annual event reminds Americans not to take for granted their precious freedom to read. A series of events, read-ins and other activities will take place throughout the nation. For a complete list, go to www.ala.org/bbooks

As always, books for children and young adults are prominent among the most challenged books of the year. Here's the ALA's take on the books that created the biggest stir during 2003:

Phyllis Reynolds Naylor's Alice series tops the list of most challenged books of 2003, ending the four-year reign of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, according to the American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom. The Alice series drew complaints from parents and others concerned about the books' sexual content.

The ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom received a total of 458 challenges last year. A challenge is defined as a formal, written complaint, filed with a library or school requesting that materials be removed because of content or appropriateness. The majority of challenges are reported by public libraries, schools and school libraries. According to Judith F. Krug, director of the Office for Intellectual Freedom, the number of challenges reflects only incidents reported, and for each reported, four or five remain unreported.

The "Ten Most Challenged Books of 2003" reflect a wide variety of themes. The books, in order of most frequently challenged are:

- Alice series, for sexual content, using offensive language, and being unsuited to age group.
- Harry Potter series, for its focus on wizardry and magic.
- "Of Mice and Men" by John Steinbeck, for using offensive language.

- "Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture" by Michael A. Bellesiles, for inaccuracy.
- "Fallen Angels" by Walter Dean Myers, for racism, sexual content, offensive language, drugs and violence.
- "Go Ask Alice" by Anonymous, for drugs.
- "It's Perfectly Normal" by Robie Harris, for homosexuality, nudity, sexual content and sex education.
- "We All Fall Down" by Robert Cormier, for offensive language and sexual content.
- "King and King" by Linda de Haan, for homosexuality.
- "Bridge to Terabithia" by Katherine Paterson, for offensive language and occult/satanism.
- Off the list this year, but on the list for several years past, are "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" by Maya Angelou, for sexual content, racism, offensive language, violence and being unsuited to age group; "Captain Underpants" by Dav Pilkey, for insensitivity and being unsuited to age group; and "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" by Mark Twain, for racism, insensitivity and offensive language.

Once again, for all the details about Banned Books Week, go to www.ala.org/bbooks

Building a Story, Chapter by Chapter by Laura Backes

One of the challenges authors face when writing anything longer than a picture book is knowing when to insert chapter breaks. Chapters serve several purposes, one of which is to divide the text into manageable chunks. The younger the reader, the shorter those chunks should be. Easy readers and young chapter books (for kids up to about age 9) have chapters under five pages long. It's important to give beginning readers frequent breaks. Middle grade novels average eight pages per chapter; young adult chapters can go up to 12 pages. These numbers are general guidelines; the story should ultimately dictate the length of the chapters. But keep in mind that while there's no such thing as a chapter that's too short, excessively lengthy chapters can give the impression that the plot is stalled instead of moving forward.

Chapters are built from several scenes that make up one plot point. Shorter books have simpler plots, therefore fewer scenes are required for each plot point. For example, in the first two chapters of a chapter book for ages 7-10, Emma's father has taken a new job that requires him to travel frequently. So Emma, who lost her mother when she was a baby, will now live with her grandparents while

Dad is on the road. (Plot point 1: Emma moves in with Grandma and Grandpa. Scenes: Emma's father brings her to grandparents' house; Emma says good-bye to Dad who is leaving on a long business trip; Emma watches Dad drive away from the window of her attic bedroom. End Chapter 1). Emma's sad about leaving her school and is afraid her old friends will forget about her.

She's also afraid Dad will forget about her tenth birthday, which is less than a month away. Grandma and Grandpa think birthday parties are frivolous, and never do more than send her a card. (Plot point 2: Emma encounters the unfamiliar surroundings of her grandparents' house and learns that her grandparents haven't celebrated a birthday or anniversary for 30 years. Scenes: Emma unpacks in the dark, musty attic room; Grandma gives Emma a list of chores; Emma mentions her birthday at dinner and is told there will be no party. End Chapter 2). Middle grade and young adult novels are more complex, weaving subplots into the main storyline. So a chapter may contain a plot point for the primary story, as well as a plot point for a subplot. Or, a chapter may exist solely to develop a subplot, in which case it would also be made up of scenes that convey one subplot point.

Once you've determined when your chapters will break, you need to decide how you'll accomplish this. Easy reader chapters are best when they are self-contained units—in other words, each chapter stands alone almost like a short story. They are distinct events that don't necessarily lead immediately into the next chapter. This allows the child to read one chapter in a sitting and then pick up the book later without losing the thread of the plot. In action-packed plots for older readers, you may choose to break the chapter in the middle of a scene, thus heightening the suspense. For example, in the last scene of Chapter 4, Josh is alone in the house at night and hears a knock on the door. He tiptoes up to the window and peers out at the porch, but sees nothing. Then he hears another knock. If you resist having him answer the door until the beginning of Chapter 5, your readers won't put down the book.

More middle grade and young adult fiction is being written with two main characters who alternate telling the story. The clearest way to do this is to give each narrator his or her own chapters. Alert the reader to each chapter's viewpoint character either by writing in third person (Hannah woke early the next morning...; Brent dashed into class just as the bell rang...), or by titling the chapters with the viewpoint characters' names. Ground the reader in the time and place immediately. Use words like The next day, That night, or Later that week to show how much time has passed since the last chapter this character narrated. When the setting or time period changes between two scenes within a chapter, you can insert a drop down (an extra blank line) before the new scene to give a visual clue that the story's moving forward, but also use a transition to show when and where the new scene takes place (The street lights came on just as Hannah rang Brent's doorbell.)

Outlining your story before you begin writing can help decide where your chapters will break. Or, after your first draft is complete, go back and jot down the plot points you've covered in each chapter. Do you have two major plot events in one chapter? Try breaking that chapter into two. Does the chapter fail to advance

the main plotline or a subplot? If so, that chapter doesn't serve a clear purpose in the story, and should either be cut or incorporated into another chapter. Building a book with strong chapters keeps the story moving, and guarantees the plot will be much more satisfying to the reader.

This article excerpted from Children's Book Insider, The Newsletter for Children's Writers. [Visit now](#) for more info and a special offer.

A Crash Course in Submitting a Manuscript by Laura Backes

While the submission process may feel like second nature to experienced writers, it's easy to forget that newcomers aren't aware of the specific procedures. And since everyone can benefit from a refresher course now and then, here's a rundown of the steps:

First, collect addresses of appropriate publishers by perusing market guides like Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market, industry newsletters such as Children's Book Insider, and looking through similar books at the store or library. Then send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the publisher asking for writer's guidelines (you can start this process while you're still writing your book as it may take a few weeks to receive a response). Review the guidelines carefully to make sure your manuscript fits with what the publisher is looking for.

Most publishers want to see the entire manuscript for picture books. Type your manuscript on white paper, double spaced, indenting at the beginning of each paragraph. Use at least one inch margins on each side, and justify the left margin only. Put your name and the title of the book at the top of each page, and number the pages consecutively. Your name, address, phone number and email should appear in the upper left-hand corner of the first page. Center the title of the manuscript about a third of the way down on page 1, skip a line, and then start the text.

Don't break the text up into pages as it would appear in the finished book, and don't include illustrations unless you're a professional artist (in which case, send a black and white dummy with a sketch of each illustration and 2-3 copies of finished color illustrations along with the typed manuscript). Send with a brief cover letter stating the title, intended age group, and word count of the story. Add any previous publishing experience and memberships to writing organizations (if you don't have such experience, leave this section out). Mention if this is a simultaneous submission (sending the manuscript to several publishers at once), and include a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) with enough postage to return the manuscript if necessary.

For longer fiction, publishers often want a query letter and sample chapters. The query starts out with the same basic information as the cover letter above, but also includes a brief synopsis of the plot. Try to write the query in the same style as the manuscript, and include information on the main characters, the conflict and the resolution of the plot. Add your publishing experience, and tell the editor you can send the entire manuscript if she's interested. Ideally, the entire query letter will fit on one page. Send with the first two chapters of the manuscript and a SASE.

For longer nonfiction, a book proposal is generally requested. This gives a brief overview of the book (one or two paragraphs describing the tone and slant of the information), and a chapter-by-chapter outline (with a sentence or two listing the information covered in each chapter). Attach the first two chapters if it's requested in the writer's guidelines, and also a bibliography of your resources. In your cover letter, list the target audience, the estimated length of the finished manuscript, why your book is different from others on the market on the same subject, and your expertise on the topic. Send with a SASE.

Nonfiction picture book publishers may require a query (in which case you'd outline the book in one or two paragraphs and also include the information from the nonfiction cover letter above), or the entire manuscript. If sending the whole manuscript, attach a brief cover letter as with fiction picture books, but also mention how your book fits into the current market and your credentials on the topic.

Following the proper submission procedures gets easier with practice, and ensures that your manuscript will get a serious look. Take the time to give each editor exactly what she wants, and she'll give your work closer consideration.

Note: For much more information on writing cover letters, query letters and book proposals, see *Author to Editor: Query Letter Secrets of the Pros*, edited by Linda Arms White. It includes over 30 actual queries used by authors to sell everything from picture books to young adult nonfiction. Go to <http://write4kids.com/a2e.html> for all the details.

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Using Slang In Your Writing by Laura Backes

If someone told you to "fade", would you ignore them or guard your wallet? The answer depends not just on who is doing the talking, but when. Joe College in

the early 1930's use the term to mean "to leave"; a 1940's zoot-suiter "faded" by covering a bet; it meant "to ignore" in the 1980's hip-hip vernacular; and the youth of the 1990's said something was "fade" when it crimped their style. Simple words—fade, sweet, lamp, dig and cut, to name just a few—change dramatically when incorporated into the slang of each generation. Usually the meanings have nothing to do with the literal definitions of the terms.

So how much of this colorful verbiage should you use in your writing? Slang immediately dates a book, but that's not necessarily bad. Certain words are closely identified with different eras of American history, so slang can place the story quickly into a specific decade. The way a character talks provides a window for the reader into that character's personality, as well as his age and social class. And since slang originates from the youth culture of the time, the words themselves help portray the prevailing attitudes of teens and young adults. Finally, slang can be fun and interesting to read.

Most slang should be confined to characters' dialogue. If the story is told in first person, slang can be sprinkled sparingly throughout the narrative. Use slang when it's necessary to help define a character or show how one character stands out from the rest. Some slang grew out of subcultures, such as the Beat counterculture of the 1950's or the hip-hop culture of the 1980's and 1990's. Specific jargon helped identify members of these groups and alert the members to the presence of outsiders. Other slang is tied to occupations. If your character is a 1934 soda jerk he might respond to the order of "frankfurter with ketchup and a chocolate malt with egg to go" by shouting, "Hemorrhage a Coney Island chicken, twist it, choke it, and make it cackle on wheels" into the kitchen. Such language gives the reader a glimpse into a world that no longer exists.

But be careful not to go overboard. Writing communicates ideas, so you don't want the meaning of the story to get buried under curious figures of speech. In the above example, it may be more important to convey the wisecracking attitude of the soda jerk (and show how he creatively alleviated the boredom of his job) than for the reader to understand exactly what the customer ordered. However, if a pivotal plot point in your 1950's era novel occurs when the main character realizes her best friend is lying, don't have her reveal this to the reader with, "She's lighting up the tilt sign." Slang, along with other traits like clothing and hair style, should be used to add depth to a character and detail to a setting, not to tell the story. Above all, keep your audience in mind.

Having lived through the 1980's, we understand that "I am SO sure!" means just the opposite, but your readers (who weren't even born when Valley Girls hit the scene) might not get the sarcasm. Their only point of reference is the slang of today, so anything from an earlier decade needs to be defined by the surrounding dialogue, gestures or attitude of the speaker, or the reactions of other characters. A "deadly" car in the late 1970's could be awesome or a pile of junk (the word had two meanings). If your reader sees a Porsche drive up before the character nods appreciatively and drawls, "Look at that deadly load!", the dialogue will be easily understood.

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Crafting Great Beginnings by Laura Backes

When an editor opens up the envelope containing your manuscript and begins to read, you have 10 seconds to get her attention. If she's not captivated by the end of the first page (or maybe the second page if she's having a good day), it's not likely she'll continue.

If that sounds harsh, think about this: editors have more patience than your juvenile audience. So how do you guarantee that your readers will keep reading? The first sentence must be active, must pull the reader into the book. The first paragraph needs to set the stage by introducing elements of the main character, the setting and the upcoming conflict. By the end of the first page, your reader should be so involved in the story that there's no turning back.

Sound difficult? It is. Beginnings are so important that entire chapters have been devoted to them in writing how-to books. Crafting a compelling opening to your story takes practice, time and several revisions. But anyone can teach himself to write a better first sentence, first paragraph and first page by keeping one thing in mind: Begin at the beginning. Start your story at the beginning of the story, not the beginning of your character's life. Don't force your readers to wade through boring details of the character's past, lengthy descriptions of the character's family or home, or painful recitations of everything the character did since she got out of bed that morning. Ideally, your story opens with an event or a moment in your character's life that signals impending change. There are a few notable exceptions, which I'll talk about below, but in general you can't go wrong when you begin a book with action.

The younger audiences of picture books (up to age 8), easy readers (ages 5-9 reading on their own) and chapter books (ages 7-10) can't easily digest a lot of information in a short space, so you have to choose what story aspects you present in the first few paragraphs. Think about what's important to young readers of fiction—they want to know what the story's going to be about. So open your book by presenting the main character and the looming problem or conflict.

Emma's Magic Winter by Jean Little (Harper I Can Read) starts like this:

Emma liked reading to herself. But she did not like reading out loud.

By the third page of this easy reader (six sentences) we learn that Emma is shy and when she's called upon to read out loud in class, she can only whisper. This is a conflict young readers can certainly empathize with, and they'll want to know how Emma handles her problem.

In *Little Wolf's Book of Badness* by Ian Whybrow (chapter book, Carolrhoda), we also learn the story problem in the first paragraph:

Dear Mom and Dad,

Please please PLEEEEEZ let me come home. I have been walking and walking all day, and guess how far? Not even 10 miles, I bet. I have not even reached Lonesome Lake yet. You know I hate going on adventures. So why do I have to go hundreds of miles to Uncle Bagbad's school in the middle of a dark, damp forest?

The reader knows immediately that this is no ordinary wolf. He prefers home to damp forests, but his parents feel otherwise. We also immediately get to hear the character's voice. Middle grade readers who are drawn to fast-paced, action-packed stories also appreciate knowing the conflict early on.

Here's the first sentence of *The Boy Who Only Hit Homers* by Matt Christopher (Little Brown):

The Hooper Redbirds were having their third practice session of the spring season and Sylvester Coddmyer III, a right-hander, was batting.

No conflict yet, but we're given the setting, the main character, and the current action. Now look at the next three sentences:

Rick Wilson hurled in the first pitch. It looked good and Sylvester swung. Swish! He missed it by six inches.

To any reader who's ever played Little League baseball, this signals conflict.

Sometimes setting and time period are important elements of the story, and the author needs to set the stage for the reader before the action can begin. This can work with upper middle grade and young adult novels, but don't use it as an excuse to throw in a lot of description and unnecessary character details. In Richard Peck's *A Long Way from Chicago* (Dial), the small Midwestern town of the 1930's in which the book is set becomes almost a character in itself. In order to show the contrast between this town, which the narrator visits one week a year, and Chicago, where he lives the rest of the time, the book opens with the narrator describing Chicago's "bad old days" of Al Capone and Bugs Moran. However, Peck wanted to guarantee that the reader would stick around for the action to begin, so he created a grabber of a first sentence: You wouldn't think we'd have to leave Chicago to see a dead body.

That's using your 10 seconds for all it's worth.

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The Four Questions of Character, by Laura Backes

Over the years I've talked about writing fiction and the techniques of letting the plot flow from the characters. I've mentioned how the main character needs to be complex enough to have a problem the reader will care about. I've pointed out how, without conflict, there is no story.

This all makes sense to me, but I've realized after years of teaching writing workshops that it doesn't always make sense to others. I think it's because certain terms—conflict, tension, problem—might be off-putting to some people who want to create children's books. These words evoke visions of school violence, divorced parents and teen pregnancies.

So if the terms are too limiting for you, then throw out the terminology. Try a different approach. I suggest you start by asking yourself four questions:

What does your character want? Think about a very specific goal your character desires. Ideally, it should be a goal that arises for your character near the beginning of the book, and can be defined in one sentence. So don't worry about what your 13-year-old protagonist wanted for his seventh birthday when at this point in his life all he wants is to make the school basketball team.

Why? Why does your character have this goal? Here's where you really brainstorm, because you're delving inside your character's head. There need to be elements to her personality that make this goal important. Does she want to prove something to her mother? Is he afraid of being laughed at by his friends? Does she push herself to be perfect? Is he looking for an identity? Don't stop at the first idea that presents itself; explore each reason and brainstorm further. Points related to the main "why" can become sub-plots in novels.

What is going to help your character? Your character will have strengths and talents that help him achieve his goal. He'll also have friends, family, neighbors, pets, etc., who assist along the way. The setting could be important, or life events such as starting a new school or taking a trip. List everything you think your character needs to get what he wants. Then go through and eliminate anything that's not absolutely essential. Only those secondary characters who directly affect your protagonist's life during the time span of the plot should be included.

What is going to stand in your character's way? This is a sneaky way of working in the ideas of conflict and tension into your plot. Without any obstacles, your character will easily achieve her goal. Though some adults think a tension-free plot is satisfying to young readers, in reality it's boring. So brainstorm some roadblocks and pitfalls. Think of traits your protagonist has that will work against her (if she's too perfect, readers won't care about her). Jot down any enemies or even people who are indifferent to your character's fate. Add ideas for other external forces—such as nature, the time period or physical setting, or political events—that might stand in your character's way. Then go back to your "help" column and make sure the character has the tools necessary to overcome the obstacles.

Once you've answered these questions, you'll have enough information to begin devising a plot. This technique can work for any genre, including historical fiction (Mary wants to help the wounded Union soldier who appeared at her door in the middle of the night. Why? He reminds her of her brother. What's standing in her way? Her loyalties to her father and brothers, who are off fighting in the Confederate army; her mother; her neighbors; her strict upbringing....); mysteries (Josh wants to find out who spray painted riddles on the walls of the school. Why? He's always dreamed of being a detective, and he also wants to find the answer to one of the riddles...); science fiction, fantasy, humor and contemporary fiction. The answers to the questions will be influenced by the genre (roadblocks in a fantasy will be very different from those in a contemporary novel), but the process remains the same.

So if the idea of adding conflict to your character's life makes you nervous, or if "tension" reminds you of Stephen King and you're writing a picture book, try a different method. Ask yourself the four questions above, and you'll reveal all the information you need to begin crafting an interesting, believable and emotional story.

This article excerpted from Children's Book Insider, The Newsletter for Children's Writers. [Visit now](#) for more info and a special offer.

Jumpstart Your Career by Asking "Why?" by Laura Backes

When developing a story or article, writers learn to incorporate the "who," "when," "where," and "how." But what often gets overlooked is the "why." Without examining why a story takes place, or why an article would be of interest to the reader, the entire writing experience can be a fruitless exercise.

Why this character?

At a writing conference I once critiqued a manuscript featuring a character in a situation where you wouldn't normally expect to find him. When I wondered why he was there, the author answered, "He just is." "But how did he get there?" I asked. "One of the other characters put him there," the author stated. "Why?" I pushed. The author didn't have an answer.

If you arbitrarily think it would be cute to have a monkey, a doll, or a policeman as your story's protagonist, the reader's not going to care unless it makes sense to have that character inhabit your particular plot. And if a monkey shows up where he shouldn't be—at school, for instance—why he's there has to be an integral part of the story. But more than that, the reader has to know why this monkey is suddenly sitting in a first grade classroom. What's unique about the character that makes him the only monkey who could possibly appear in this book?

Why this story?

Just as important as knowing why your character inhabits your book is understanding why this character experiences the conflict or problem that fuels the plot. Your readers have to believe this protagonist would encounter these obstacles, and not be able to resolve the problem in a few lines of text. Not every child is afraid of the dark, so if your character hides under the covers when the lights are out, plant something in her personality that causes this behavior.

How the plot conflict is resolved also harks back to "why." Why does your character take these particular steps, instead of an easier or more obvious route, to reach his goal? What fears, hang-ups or quirks does the character have to overcome to get what he wants? Would a child understand and care about these traits? Have you laid the groundwork in the beginning of the story so the reader believes the character could not possibly act any other way, thus never forcing the reader to question you in the first place?

Why this article?

Virtually any nonfiction topic can hold a child's interest if it's presented in the right way. But first ask yourself why you're writing this article or book. Does it have a direct application to the experiences of your readers? Can it tie in with what they're learning in school? Will it enrich their lives in some way? If your motivations are clear, then take a hard look at your audience. Why would kids this age be interested in this topic? How can you present the material in a way that's entertaining as well as informative? If you find you're working hard to shape the information to fit a specific audience or format, perhaps you need to rethink your approach. Maybe you're trying to write too young, and the subject really requires an older reader. Or perhaps you assume middle graders will be fascinated with an animal alphabet book, but after researching other ABC books on the market, you learn they're really targeted to much younger children.

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Flip Your Plot and Surprise Your Readers by Laura Backes

Simon Glass was easy to hate. I never knew exactly why, there was too much to pick from. I guess, really, we each hated him for a different reason, but we didn't realize it until the day we killed him.

Thus begins *Shattering Glass*, a masterful young adult novel by Gail Giles (Roaring Brook Press). You may already know that your opening paragraph is crucial for forging a connection with the young reader. It's also your best chance to hook the editor and entice her to keep reading. This opener is, literally, a killer.

But what happens when the author gives away the dramatic moment of the story in the first paragraph? Since the reader knows how the book will end, why keep reading? If you choose this technique in your own novel, you'd do well to study *Shattering Glass* to see how one author pulled it off. First, Giles raised the stakes to life and death. That's as high as they get. Secondly, though we don't know much about this narrator yet, we do know he considers himself a murderer. The "what" of the story is revealed up front, so the author's task is to make the "how" and the "why" surprising enough to pull the reader through the book.

Because the main character admits to being a murderer off the bat—and by referring to "us" we can assume his acquaintances are involved as well—the author runs the risk of creating an unsympathetic narrator. She overcomes this by humanizing all the high school students involved, showing their good and bad qualities. Young Steward, the narrator, is not the ring leader, but is sucked along in the constantly escalating events through his desire to remain in the good graces of the charismatic Rob. Though Simon is the victim, he contributes to his demise. As Young gradually sees through the layers of Rob's veneer, he finds painful secrets in the popular boy's past. It's a story of cause and effect. As Young's actions pile one on top of the other, leading to their inevitable conclusion, teens reading the book can see how easy it would be to take a wrong turn and end up in Young's shoes. Though Young didn't start out intending to harm anyone, he willfully made enough bad decisions along the way that he ended up in a situation he didn't have the courage to walk away from. Each small step he took was utterly believable, creating a powerful message for teen readers.

Another saving grace to Young's character is that he was the only one to take responsibility for his actions, even though he carried less blame than some of the others. The reader learns this not from the story itself, which ends with the murder, but through documentary-style quotes at the beginning of each chapter from different characters five years after the fact. These comments show how

people view—and sometimes distort—the truth to suit their needs. They also convey how characters were changed because of a pivotal incident in their lives.

If you choose to catapult readers into the drama by revealing the high point at the beginning of your story, then you need something else to keep them glued to the pages. In short, the surprises must come from the depth of your characters. If the layers are complex, psychological and subtle, your readers will see elements of themselves in the characters and the impact will be even more powerful than if you'd kept the ending a secret.

This article excerpted from Children's Book Insider, The Newsletter for Children's Writers. [Visit now](#) for more info and a special offer.

Need Help? We've Got Solutions...

- Need insider secrets and fresh markets for your manuscript? Check out Children's Book Insider, the Newsletter for Children's Writers at <http://write4kids.com/aboutcbi.html>
- Just getting started and need a friendly, step-by-step guide to becoming a children's author? Check out Career Starter, The Beginner's Guide to Writing for Children at <http://write4kids.com/starter.html>
- Have you written a story but don't know what to do next? I've Written a Story, What Do I Do Now? tells you what you need to know about submitting your manuscript to publishers efficiently and professionally. <http://write4kids.com/nowwhat.html>
- Tired of getting rejection letters? Improving The Odds reveals the manuscript-revision secrets of top authors that help push them over the top. <http://write4kids.com/odds.html>
- Need to know how to write a killer query or cover letter that gets noticed? Author to Editor collects actual letters used by top authors that resulted in publishing contracts. Full analysis and lots of easy-to-apply tips help make writing the perfect query or cover letter a breeze. <http://write4kids.com/a2e.html>
- Having trouble developing a plot? Crafting strong characters? Coming up with good story ideas? Our In-Depth Workshop Series goes in-depth to make you a stronger and more confident writer. <http://write4kids.com/indepth.html>
- Care to hear—first-hand—the best advice superstar authors have to give for aspiring children's writers? In Their Own Words offers exclusive insight from Lois Lowry, Judy Blume, R.L. Stine, Chris Crutcher and many, many

more. This is pure gold and available nowhere else.

<http://write4kids.com/itow.html>

And there's more. For a full listing, just go to <http://write4kids.com/collect.html>

Learn from the Masters by Laura Backes

I love my job. I get to spend entire days in the children's section of the book store and call it research. I also get to celebrate birthdays of people I've never met. We recently marked Maurice Sendak's 75th birthday, and the 40th birthday of his most famous child, Max from *Where the Wild Things Are*. So I took the opportunity to reacquaint myself with some of Sendak's impressive body of work, and to meet *Brundibar*, his newest picture book, written by Tony Kushner and based on a Czech opera of the same name.

Whether illustrating someone else's words or his own texts, Sendak could never be accused of taking the easy route to publication. His books are complicated, deeply emotional stories, with subtexts that often illuminate the dark side of human nature. In an interview appearing in the November/December 2003 issue of *The Horn Book Magazine*, Sendak says "...we can get away with things in children's books that nobody in the adult world ever can because the assumption is that the audience is too innocent to pick it up. And in truth they're the only audience that does pick it up."

It's comments like this that show Sendak's deep respect for his audience, as well as the picture book as an art form. In the same interview, Sendak talks about how he chooses subjects he feels passionately about, or those that resonate with him on a basic emotional level. These are not cute bedtime stories, but books that reveal his soul. Some cut too close to the bone—when he was working on *Outside Over There* he had a breakdown and stepped away from the project for six months. And though he is revered as one of the most influential artists in the history of children's picture books, Sendak doesn't think of himself as a genius. "I have no brilliant conceptual gift for drawing or any really exceptional gift for writing," he told *The Horn Book*. "My talent is knowing how to make a picture book. Knowing how to pace it, knowing how to time it. The drawing and the writing are good, but if my whole career counted on that I wouldn't have made it very far."

Virtually every article in the November/December 2003 *Horn Book* is devoted to analysis and celebration of Sendak's work, and I highly recommend it for anyone interested in studying picture books. It inspired me to round up some of my other favorite author/illustrators. I'm no artist, and so I respond to picture books not from a technical aspect but with my gut. Here are three author/illustrators whose work, to me, embodies the pure emotion and wide-eyed wonder of childhood.

* Peggy Rathmann: Rathmann's illustrations always say more than her texts. Packed with tiny, delightful details and secondary characters acting out stories all their own, her books mesmerize even nonreaders. Her latest picture book, *The Day the Babies Crawled Away*, is stunning. The story is told by a mother recalling the day her young son saved all the babies when they crawled away during a town fair (the parents were busy at the pie-eating contest). The illustrations are black silhouettes against a technicolor sky. Though we can't see the characters' faces we always know who's who: the boy hero wears a fireman's helmet, the babies are distinguished by bows, bonnets and topknots. A butterfly starts the baby parade away from the fair and is soon joined by a caterpillar, a frog, a bat and a bird. The same butterfly lands on Mom's hair at the end of the day as the tired hero falls asleep in her arms. Rathmann makes clever use of every page in the book, starting the story on the! endpapers and building through the title page and dedication. Take a close look at the last picture to see how one baby relives her adventure.

* Ezra Jack Keats: Keats' classic, deceptively simple books resonate with the everyday experiences that define childhood. In analyzing *The Snowy Day*, my lack of artistic experience became apparent. At first glance, I thought the illustrations were bold shapes cut from different types of paper glued on top of each other. But closer inspection shows edges of colors bleeding together and lines that aren't quite filled in, as if they were painted with watercolors and a large brush. Faces were drawn with pencil or charcoal; snowflakes appear stenciled over tissue paper. In any case, the effect is childlike, wet and a little messy, just like playing outside after a big snowstorm. My son especially likes the spread of Peter in his red snowsuit making tracks through unmarred snow, first with his toes pointing out, then with his toes pointing in. After studying the book, Matthew said, "I can make pictures like that." We bought different types of paper and Matthew proceeded to create ! artwork modeled after Keats. In my opinion, any book so accessible that a child can make it his own is a winner.

* Chris Van Allsburg: Van Allsburg's books have a magical, otherworldly element that often takes my breath away. He is a supremely skilled artist, incorporating design, balance, color and texture in a way that gives the sense of stepping right into the picture. In one spread from *The Polar Express*, the reader is positioned above Santa's sleigh as he flies over thousands of elves crowded into the North Pole's city center. I almost get dizzy every time I see it. *The Polar Express* is a very personal story about a boy going for a ride on a magic train that takes him, along with hundreds of other kids, to the North Pole to meet Santa. Van Allsburg's somber palette, the straightforward nature of the text, the depiction of the North Pole as a city of tall buildings past a desert of ice, and the poignant first-person narration all help the story to feel true. Put aside those cutesy Santa stories—here's the real thing.

I urge you to spend a day in the book store or library finding those books that make music for you. By studying their rhythms, you'll learn how to make your own stories sing.

This article excerpted from Children's Book Insider, The Newsletter for Children's Writers. [Visit now](#) for more info and a special offer.

Creating Characters for Older Readers by Laura Backes

When you search for a novel to read, do you hope to find a story about someone exactly like yourself? That first glimmer of recognition might be intriguing, but after several pages you'd probably get bored. Adults read for entertainment, escape, and to get glimpses of lives different from their own. If the main character is too ordinary or familiar, the story won't hold any surprises. You already know how it ends.

Middle grade and young adult readers are no different. They want to identify strongly with the characters in their books, and understand those characters' problems. But they also need the characters to be a bit bigger, braver, or smarter than themselves. The problems must be more dramatic than the readers' own, the stakes higher. Tension builds when protagonists act more impulsively, foolhardy or selfishly than the reader would ever do. Novels for older readers portray a magnified version of real life.

Even though the characters and their situations might be drawn more sharply in fiction than in reality, they still have to be believable. The reader must be certain that these people could actually exist. The protagonist, however troubled, must be sympathetic enough for the reader to care about his or her problems. Including underlying universal themes of adolescence connects the reader on an emotional level.

Consider *Lucy the Giant*, a young adult novel by Sherri L. Smith. At over six feet tall, Lucy is literally bigger than her peers. Her size is in sharp contrast to the small Alaskan town where she lives. Lucy's greatest desire is to fit in, a yearning familiar to most readers. One day, tired of dragging her alcoholic father home from the bars at night and enduring the taunts of her classmates and pitying glances from adults in town, Lucy runs away to Kodiak Island. Mistaken for an adult, she gets a job on a crabbing boat, where Lucy finds adventure, a family of sorts, and even has a near-death experience that teaches her running away from problems is never the answer.

It's unusual for an adventure story to feature a female protagonist, but virtually every teen will recognize part of him or herself in Lucy. Lucy's mother abandoned her at age seven, and Lucy spends much of the book blaming her parents for her problems. This is understandable, but what makes Lucy more resilient than an

average teen is that she decides to take responsibility for her own life. At age 15, Lucy—already incredibly brave, physically strong, and carrying heavy emotional baggage—grows up.

It's this "growing up" that marks a young adult character. They enter the story from the world of adolescence, and emerge with tools they'll carry into adulthood. Though the reader might not make that journey as quickly or completely, he or she needs examples of teens who did. If 13-year-old Brian Robeson from *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen can survive by himself for 54 days on a remote island in the Canadian wilderness, then surely the reader can hope to survive junior high.

Middle grade readers also love characters who face situations that are more dramatic than their own. These characters learn lessons about life or how the world works, but in the end are still content to remain adolescents for a few more years. In middle grade books, the characters who often unwittingly provide the drama simply by being themselves. Polly Horvath is a master at creating quirky, complex, funny characters who spin the plot in a new direction simply by entering a scene. Horvath pays special attention to the adults who inhabit the worlds of her child characters (*The Trolls* and *Everything on a Waffle* are my two favorites). Richard Peck does the same thing in his award-winning historical novels *A Long Way from Chicago* and *A Year Down Yonder*. Both authors have created child viewpoint characters who are dealing with everything from surviving a summer visit with Grandma to waiting for Mom and Dad to show up after their boats were lost at sea. But the stories get their sparks from larger-than-life adult characters. The humor, and the deeper meanings of these books, comes from the children gaining deeper understanding of the eccentric adults in their lives.

When you're developing characters for your middle grade or young adult novel, start with qualities readers will see in themselves. Then raise the stakes and see how your character reacts. Make her six feet tall. Strand a boy with no wilderness experience on an island with nothing but a hatchet. Send some city kids to spend two weeks in a small town with a crotchety grandmother. Shake up an ordinary family by dropping in an aunt from another country who spins tall tales that just might be true. Go just beyond your own experience, and that of your readers, and think big.

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Page-Turning Picture Books by Laura Backes

Picture books aren't read, they're performed.

The very act of reading a story out loud to a child forces the reader to add inflection, dramatic pauses, and even ad-lib some commentary. Where the pages are turned can add (or detract) as much from the experience as the quality of the story itself.

Picture books are almost always 32 pages long. There is no mysterious artistic reason for this; it's simply how the printing presses work. If the book is longer, it will go up in 8-page increments, but most publishers don't risk this added expense on new authors. The 32 pages includes the endpages (the white or decorated pages at the beginning and end of the book), the title page, and the copyright/dedication page. So the author has an average of 26 pages to tell the story. In general, the first page of text is a righthand page, and the last page of text is on the left.

Once you've written your story, it's useful to break the text into 26 sections, type each section on a separate piece of paper, and staple those pages together like a book. Now read your story as you turn the pages. Does each spread (two facing pages) encompass a different scene from those before and after? Are your characters doing something the illustrator can draw? Finally, is there a reason your readers will want to turn the page to see what comes next?

Talented picture book writers consider pacing when they're revising their texts. Here are four page-turning methods that work:

Anticipation and surprise. In her book *Maxwell's Magic Mix-Up*, Linda Ashman devises a rollicking rhyming story of a magician who can't get anything right. While performing at a birthday party, Maxwell accidentally turns the guests one by one into animals and objects. After the first mismanaged spell, the reader anticipates that Maxwell's magic will go wrong again. The right side of each spread sets up how Maxwell tries to undo his blunders, and shows him waving his wand. The reader turns the page to find out the result of the spell, which is always something different from what Maxwell intended. When Maxwell's nephew arrives to fix the mess, the same pattern is repeated, with better results.

Flow. In my opinion, Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* is one of the most elegant picture books ever written. He employs long, rhythmic sentences to lead the reader into the story, with tight, descriptive phrases evoking the changing illustrations. The pages break mid-sentence, so the reader is forced to turn the page to finish the thought. As the action speeds up the sentences shorten, then lengthen again to lead Max and the reader back home.

Complete verse. Often in books written in rhyme, the pages break at the end of a verse. This is satisfying visually, as each verse should contain a distinct scene, but can be risky if there isn't enough forward momentum to the overall story to keep the reader going. In *Food Fight!* by Carol Diggory Shields, the author has another hurdle besides the rhyme: the characters are inanimate objects. In order for the illustrator to have enough to work with, these objects (food) must really act up. The story has a simple concept: Here's what happens in your refrigerator at night. The food gets antsy, a food fight ensues, and then everything must be cleaned up before daybreak. Each spread contains one verse, but another

ingenious element keeps the pages turning: the text is riddled with puns. The coffee perks, the gelatin jumps, and the chocolates kiss. The book's design also helps move the eye across the page with graphic typefaces that twist about the food, speech bubbles, and edibles with expressive faces.

Cause and effect. Cause and effect allows the story to build naturally scene by scene, with one event leading directly to another. The payoff when the page is turned might be humorous, scary or satisfying, but it should never be predictable. It's not as action-packed as using anticipation and surprise, but it still holds the reader's interest. Many picture books use this pacing technique. A terrific example is Janet Stevens' *Tops & Bottoms*, in which a hare tricks a rich, lazy bear into letting him use the bear's land to plant several crops of vegetables. Each scene is a setup for the following page. The text focuses alternately on the bear and the hare, so the reader sees that one character's actions cause the reactions of the other. The reacting character in turn sets the next scene in motion.

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Killer Query Letters that Work by Laura Backes

In a perfect world, you'd be able to pitch your manuscript to an editor over a leisurely cup of coffee. But we're forced to inhabit the real world, where you've got about 10 seconds to hook an editor before she decides to continue reading or reach for her form rejection slip. And more and more, this "hook" must come in the form of a query letter.

A query is a business letter asking permission to send the project described. It is either sent without an accompanying manuscript, or with two or three sample chapters (the publisher's guidelines will state which form the query should take). If the query letter stands alone, it's your only chance to sell the editor on your book. Many authors hate the task of writing a query, but it's a necessity in today's publishing industry. Editors, overwhelmed by the sheer number of submissions they receive, need a quick way to weed out the good from the not-so-good. A well-crafted query has a better chance of leading to a well-crafted manuscript.

The first rule of query writing is that the letter must fit on one page. That's one side of one page (no cheating and printing a double-sided letter). Type it single spaced, but leave sufficient white space at the top and bottom so the letter looks uncluttered and appealing. Why such length limitations? If you can't sum up your book in less than a page, you haven't sufficiently clarified your idea.

Your first paragraph (two paragraphs if you've written a longer novel) conveys to the editor what your book is about. Think of this as the copy that would go on the jacket flap. You don't want to give away all the surprises, but you do want to entice the reader to buy the book. For fiction, establish your main character in a sentence or two, present the character's primary problem or conflict, mention one or two things the character plans to do to resolve the problem, and bring up some of the obstacles that will stand in his way. Hit the high points upon which the action is based. The synopsis should also reflect the tone of the book—humorous, scary, action-packed, somber, etc. Don't discuss the theme, or the underlying message of the book. This should be obvious to the editor through the plot.

In nonfiction queries, begin by stating an interesting fact about your topic that helps establish a market for your book (Did you know Jello, in its many shapes and forms, is eaten by 3 million people a day?) Follow this by describing what your book is about and your particular slant on the topic. In a few sentences explain your approach and how it's appropriate for the intended age group, the questions you'll raise and answer, and any additional materials your book would have (photographs, maps, activities, etc.) You can add a paragraph explaining your research and any unusual information you've uncovered. List good firsthand sources available to you or new data that hasn't ever appeared in a children's book.

After your synopsis, list the book's title, word count, age group and genre (historical fiction, humorous mystery, science activity book, etc.) Explain why you've chosen to submit to this publisher (show that you've done your market research and describe in one sentence why your book would fit in with this publisher's list). For nonfiction, also state how your book would be different from other books on the market on the same topic.

Your next paragraph is about you. Give any information pertinent to writing children's books (previous publishing credits, memberships in writing organizations, writing classes you've taken, professional experience with children of the age group for which you want to write). Nonfiction credentials may include extensive experience with or study of the topic. If you don't have any relevant information, skip this paragraph. Editors know that everyone has to start somewhere.

Finally, ask the editor if you may send the entire manuscript, and thank her for her time. Attach sample chapters if indicated in the publisher's guidelines (nonfiction publishers may also request a chapter-by-chapter outline). Enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope for the editor's reply. If you're sending a letter only, the SASE can be a business size envelope. If you're including sample chapters, your SASE should be large enough to return the entire packet.

Always address the letter and envelope to a specific editor whenever possible. Use good stationery with your name, address, phone number and email printed at the top. Send by regular mail—brightly-colored envelopes, trinkets or treats included in the package, or Fed-Ex delivery won't increase your chances.

Then, drop your query in the mail and start on your next manuscript!

Want to read some actual query letters that worked? *Author to Editor: Query Letter Secrets of the Pros* contains over 30 contract-generating book proposals, cover letters and query letters from successful children's authors. Available exclusively from CBI, you can learn more about this remarkable resource by going to <http://www.write4kids.com/a2e.html>

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Should You Copyright Your Work? by Laura Backes

One question I get asked all the time from beginning writers and illustrators is if they need to copyright their work before submitting it to publishers. Many assume this is a necessary step in the process, but it's not. If you do get a book contract, the publisher will copyright the text and/or illustrations for you (either in your name or in the publisher's name, depending on your agreement). But the work officially belongs to you even before the papers are filed. But don't take my word for it—let's see what the government has to say.

According to the U.S. Copyright Office, "Copyright is secured automatically when the work is created, and a work is 'created' when it is fixed in a copy or phonorecord for the first time. 'Copies' are material objects from which a work can be read or visually perceived either directly or with the aid of a machine or device, such as books, manuscripts, sheet music, film, videotape or microfilm. 'Phonorecords' are material objects embodying fixations of sounds (excluding, by statutory definition, motion picture soundtracks) such as cassette tapes, CDs, or LPs....If a work is prepared over a period of time, the part of the work that is fixed on a particular date constitutes the created work as of that date."

So once your work is fixed on paper, it's copyrighted. Your particular story, poem, or article belongs to you. Your depiction of an image with watercolor, pencil or oil paints is your property. However, be aware there are some things you can't copyright, namely "works that have not been fixed in a tangible form of

expression...titles, names, short phrases, slogans, familiar symbols, listings of ingredients or contents...ideas, procedures, methods, systems, processes, concepts, principles, discoveries or devices...and works consisting entirely of information that is common property and containing no original authorship.” So if the text to your concept book consists of the alphabet and numbers one through ten, and nothing more, you can’t copyright it. However, if you use numbers and letters to write an original poem, then it’s your creation and can be copyrighted in your name.

You can put a copyright notice on your work even before the forms have been filed with the Copyright Office (copyright © 2004 by John Smith), and this helps many authors and illustrators feel more secure. The truth is, if you are submitting to reputable publishers, the chances of your work getting stolen is very slim. The world of publishing is very small, and a publisher that steals works from the slush pile and produces them without compensating the creators would be quickly put out of business. Occasionally, an author will tell me she’s had a manuscript rejected by a publisher only to find out that the same publisher produced another, similar story a few months later. If this has happened to you, remember: You can’t copyright themes, which are timeless, universal ideas. You can only copyright the embodiment of those themes; the plot, characters and dialogue. The same themes appear in stories all the time, and if a publisher didn’t like your particular treatment of the top! ic, it’s up to you to keep submitting until you find someone who does.

If you want to copyright your work, all the forms you need are available for immediate download at <http://www.loc.gov/copyright/forms/>

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Do You Need An Agent? by Laura Backes

Whenever a group of beginning writers gets together, the question of “Do I need an agent?” invariably comes up. And the simple answer is no, you don’t. Many authors sell their first book without an agent, and value the experience of writing query letters, researching publishers and negotiating their contracts. Acting as your own agent will give you an education in the business side of publishing and help you understand why some books sell and others don’t.

But if you’ve decided you’d like an agent, finding one is much the same as finding a publisher. You need to research the possibilities, submit to agents who are taking new clients and who represent work similar to yours, and then wait for an offer of representation or a rejection. Since agents, like editors, have personal

tastes, the “fit” is important. The best way to find an agent? By talking to other writers at writing conferences and on children’s writing message boards (see the CBI message board at www.Write4Kids.com), and hearing agents speak at writing events. You can also find lists of agents in the Guide to Literary Agents from Writer’s Digest Books. Take a look at other books the agent has represented (listed in the Guide) to judge if this agent might successfully add you to her client base.

What an agent can do for you. An agent won’t make you a better writer, but a good agent should give you general editorial direction so your manuscript is as strong as possible before being sent to an editor (“I feel the main character’s conflict in your second picture book isn’t as clearly defined as it could be. Try revising it again.”) Some agents charge hefty editing or “reading” fees that include editorial critiques. Read the fine print before paying for such services. While the editing advice might be valid, there is generally no guarantee of representation even if the manuscript is revised according to the critique.

An agent will submit your work to targeted editors, negotiate the publishing contract, possibly retain some subsidiary rights (selling the work to book clubs, foreign publishers, etc.) to sell on your behalf (allowing you to keep more of the money from these sales than if the publisher sold them for you), keep track of deadlines and royalty statements, and generally act as go-between for you and the editor on business issues. This allows the writer and editor to keep their relationship focused on the writing of the book. An agent might also work with the publisher’s publicity department on coordinating book signings and other author appearances. For her work, the agent is paid a 15% commission on domestic rights sales, and a 20% commission on foreign rights sales of the work. The agent draws a commission on any money the book earns for as long as it’s in print.

Other costs. Most agents bill clients for certain expenses incurred from submitting their work to publishers, such as photocopying, overseas postage or long distance phone calls. These expenses are standard and vary slightly by agent. Some agents expect their clients to reimburse expenses on a regular basis, others deduct the expenses from the advance once the book is sold.

I’ve recently heard of some agents charging a per-submission fee; in other words, for a certain amount up front, the agent will make a specific number of submissions to publishers. While this isn’t illegal, in my opinion it eliminates the agent’s motivation for trying to sell your work. A good agent will only take on manuscripts he’s confident he can place with a publisher, since if the author doesn’t make any money, neither does the agent. If the agent is being paid regardless of whether the manuscript sells, there’s less motivation to actually try to match that manuscript with an appropriate editor.

The bottom line. Be sure to sign a contract with any agent which spells out the services the agent will provide, the commission rate, and any expenses you’re expected to reimburse. Ideally, the contract should have a termination clause allowing either party to dissolve the agreement with 60 days written notice to the other. And remember: the agent is working for you, so take your time and

carefully choose the person who will be representing your work to potential editors. A good agent can be the one constant ally in your career, seeing you from first-time writer to established professional.

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Rules You Can (Sometimes) Break by Laura Backes

The "rules" of manuscript submission exist for a reason: if authors act professionally and follow standard procedures, editors are free to evaluate the merits of the writing. But some rules can be bent if the author has a very good reason for doing so. Below are a few of those flexible rules:

You can include illustration suggestions with your manuscript if...

...something needs to happen in the pictures for the plot of the book to make sense, but this action is not mentioned in the text. In this case, add a brief explanation of the illustration in your cover letter. If the picture comes at the end of the book (such as the punchline to a joke set up on the previous page), you may add a one-sentence illustration note on the manuscript itself.

You may send illustrations with the manuscript if...

...you are a professional artist. This means you have art experience and/or training, and your illustrations are of a quality that can compete with artwork in other published picture books. You can also include illustration samples from someone else (an illustrator) if you have written the text AND the publisher specifically requests in its guidelines that they want authors to suggest illustrators for their books. Otherwise, leave the selection of the illustrator up to the publisher.

You can go over the standard word count if...

...the story requires more length than is standard. This isn't a license to get wordy. Some books have complicated plots that can't be resolved in the average page count (the Harry Potter books are popular examples). However, the shorter the book, the more important it is that authors adhere to accepted limits. Picture

books will never be 3500 words long (1000 words is average). And always pay close attention to magazine word requirements, which have no wiggle room.

You can pitch your general idea to an editor over the phone, or via email, if...

...you already have a close working relationship. If an editor is familiar with your work and has published your books, then she will be open to hearing new ideas as you're developing them. But if you're not yet published, don't try this shortcut. Write the book (fiction) or the book proposal (nonfiction) and follow standard submission procedures.

You can outline your ideas for marketing your book in your initial submission if...

...you've written a nonfiction book or fiction with a very specific, niche audience. Even then, back up your marketing suggestions with facts, statistics, specific plans for how and where the book could be sold, and mention of personal/professional experience that ties in with the topic of the book. For general fiction, don't talk marketing until you have a book contract.

Sell Your Work to Magazines by Laura Backes

Getting published in a magazine requires more than just the ability to write well. Here are some tips for raising your chances at success:

Find Your Focus: Magazines are extremely niche-oriented, and acceptable submissions need to fit that niche. Suppose you just returned from a snorkeling trip in Hawaii, and want to write a piece for kids on your experience. First, determine the age group you want to reach. If you're interested in detailing actual snorkeling techniques, the middle grade audience would be more appropriate than younger children. Next, go to a library and look at some recent issues of magazines for this age group, and also page through the Magazines section of Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market. This step is vital for shaping the focus of your piece. Boys' Life is a possibility, and would probably appreciate a how-to focus. Dolphin Log might want you to emphasize the marine life you encountered. Did your nine-year-old daughter accompany you on your trip? Do a profile of her snorkeling experience for American Girl.

You can also use your research and snorkeling know-how to write a short story. An adventure story, laced with scientific facts, might appeal to a general-interest magazine like Highlights. Or suppose your main character learned a valuable lesson about respecting the sacredness of all living things. Such a story might fit a nondenominational Christian magazine like Pockets.

Research the Magazines: Once you've determined the specific slant of your work, zero in on several magazines that look like possible markets. Try to read at least three recent back issues. Note the tone of the articles. See how much factual information is included in the body of each piece, and what's relegated to sidebars.

For fiction, notice whether the stories have an underlying lesson, or they're vehicles for presenting facts. Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the each magazine asking for writer's guidelines. Many magazines now have a web site with their guidelines posted online. You'll need to know the word limits of articles, whether or not there's a theme for each issue, and if the material needs to be geared toward boys or girls, or if either is fine.

Research Your Topic: Now's the time to do any additional research on your subject. Don't rely exclusively on secondhand sources, such as encyclopedias. Always gather more information than you think you'll need. Even if you're writing fiction, it's a good idea to gather some facts about the setting and any skills or knowledge your main character possesses that factor into the story.

Put Together the Package: If you've already sent for writer's guidelines, then you know what the editor requires as far as a proposal. For articles, this often consists of a query letter (with a synopsis of the article, a bibliography of resources and brief information on your expertise on the topic). The query will tell the editor how you plan to approach the subject and convey the information to your audience. Often a query is enough for an editor to assign an article. For fiction, the author usually has to submit the complete story. In either case, be sure your submission carefully follows the magazine's requirements as far as word length, subject matter, and what needs to be included in the package. A sloppy presentation will be automatically rejected. Writers often turn specific research and expertise into several magazine pieces, targeting different markets with each one. If you learn how to create exactly what an editor wants, that snorkeling trip could result! in several bylines.

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Three Steps to Mastering the Market by Laura Backes

Last month, I described the steps involved in submitting a manuscript to a publisher. (You can view this article by going to <http://write4kids.com/submit.html>). This month, I want to take a step back in the

process, and talk about how to find the right publisher for your manuscript. After all—even the most perfectly presented manuscript has no chance of getting published if it doesn't meet the needs of the publishing house that receives it.

The key to success: research.

Editors always plead with authors to research the market before submitting manuscripts. This makes sense—it cuts down on the number of inappropriate submissions an editor may receive, and presumably will lower the chance of a manuscript getting rejected. But how, exactly, does one research a market that produces thousands of new products each year? I suggest a systematic, three-part approach which works for book and magazine publishers. This involves studying a publisher's overall list, individual books or issues, and their writers' guidelines. It doesn't matter which part you do first as long as you cover all three. (Note: Illustrators can use this same system to research potential illustration markets and then send for artists' guidelines.)

Overall lists. Book publishers have two lists: spring and fall. A magazine's "list" is comprised of a year's worth of issues. To get a sense of what each publisher does, read industry newsletters such as *Children's Book Insider*, attend writers' conferences, and consult *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market* (published annually by *Writer's Digest Books*). Note which publishers cater to the audience for whom you want to write, both in age group and subject matter. Send for these publishers' catalogs, generally free for a 9 x 12 self-addressed, stamped envelope with two to four firstclass stamps (bigger publishers=bigger catalogs). For magazines, get the most recent issue and then study back issues at the library. Many publishers also have web sites that feature their current lists, though I find it's easier to study and compare material if you have a hard copy.

But what if you receive several catalogs from large publishers and they all look the same? Then it's time to read the fine print and find the differences. Does HarperCollins seem to have an abundance of fiction picture books for ages 5-8? Then they might not be buying much for this age group for the next couple of years. Has another publisher just debuted a line of nonfiction chapter books? Maybe your chapter book on whales is just what they need. Do certain publishing giants tend to repackage classics from known authors rather than books from new writers? Pick another publisher who isn't afraid to feature new talent. Narrow down your number of potential markets.

Individual books or issues. Go to a bookstore or library and actually hold books from your potential publishers in your hands. Look at the vocabulary and sentence structure, the style of writing, the pacing of picture book stories. For magazines, note length and subject matter of fiction and the slant on nonfiction topics. Though you don't want your book to be just like someone else's, it must fit in with the overall taste of the editors from each company, and the general tone of a publisher's list. Narrow down your markets once again.

Writers' guidelines. Now it's time to send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to each publisher asking for writers' guidelines. Follow the submissions procedures in the guidelines exactly. If you submit a manuscript or query letter more than a

month after receiving guidelines, call the publisher to verify that they are still open to submissions.

Once your manuscript is in the mail, try to put it out of your mind and start writing something else. And be assured that all your research means your work is most likely headed to where it will be eagerly read.

This article excerpted from Children's Book Insider, The Newsletter for Children's Writers. [Visit now](#) for more info and a special offer.

Three Ways to Add Tension to Your Story by Laura Backes

I've often written about the need for tension, or suspense, in fiction. Another word would be "conflict"—those twists and turns of plot that get the reader's heart beating. Whatever term you use, it's an essential element in every story. What's the point of reading a book in which the characters only face happy, calm, predictable situations? In a word, it's boring.

But you can't simply lay tension over an existing story. The conflict has to be an intrinsic element of the plot and characters. Plan out your tension from the beginning; incorporate suspense into the basic action of the plot. Here are some ways you can achieve tension-filled stories.

Start with the characters. As you're creating your characters, give them strengths and weaknesses. Your main character's strengths will help him or her solve the problem of the story. But your character's weaknesses can provide obstacles to reaching that resolution and therefore enrich the plot. For example, if you're writing a middle grade mystery, your character might have extensive knowledge about rocks or bats which helps her find an essential clue inside a cave. But if she's deathly afraid of the dark, going into that cave will be a challenge.

Often it's the characters weaknesses, or flaws, that get him in trouble in the first place. Or, create secondary characters that work in opposition to your main character, throwing roadblocks in her way as she wrestles with the story's conflict.

Ask "What if..." In *The ABCs of Writing for Children*, compiled by Elizabeth Koehler-Pentacoff (Barnes & Noble Books), author Katherine Sturtevant said, "If you're writing a novel, spend some time writing pages that you know will never be part of the book. Put your character in various situations and see how he or she behaves. How would she react if her house had burned down and all of her possessions were gone? What if her best friend won a contest she'd been hoping to win herself? If the person she resented most in the world suddenly gave her a

present? Since these situations don't have to appear in your book, there's an endless list of them. You can put your character in scenes with her parents, siblings, or friends until you feel you have a good handle on how she would behave under a variety of situations."

Once you've learned your character's reactions to stressful situations, incorporate those reactions into scenes from your plot.

Raise the stakes. The most satisfying plots have the character trying to achieve a goal, failing several times, and finally succeeding. Each time the character fails, the tension mounts. Don't be afraid to raise the stakes for your character—put him in danger, pull the rug out from under her feet, make him face his worst fear. If the worst thing that could possibly happen to your character actually occurs, and your character overcomes those odds and succeeds, your readers will hang on every word.

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The Fine Art of Plotting by Laura Backes

In a recent issue of *The Writer* magazine, Madeleine L'Engle talks about her book *The Arm of the Starfish* and says, "I had the book pretty intricately plotted. This is essential, because if you do not have a plot there is nothing to change."

That comment stopped me in my tracks. I'd never thought about why you plot out a book that way before, but it made perfect sense. I always knew a story outline was a framework, a way to keep the action on course, but this turned that belief on its head. If you don't know where you want to go, how will you recognize a better destination when it comes along? How can you revise, polish, improve a story if you don't have a starting point?

The knowledge that the first idea is often not the best idea is something experienced writers have learned the hard way. But they accept this because they love the creative process. L'Engle went on to explain that her protagonist, Adam Eddington, went to sleep one night, and when he woke up a young man named Joshua was sitting in his room. "Now Adam was surprised to see Joshua. I was surprised to see Joshua. There had been no Joshua in my plot." She had a choice: either rewrite 150 pages to incorporate Joshua into the story, or kick him out of the book. He stayed.

It's important to understand how to plot out a story or organize an article. A certain structure—the way characters move from point A to point B, at what point a chapter should end, how to present information to make a compelling argument—is necessary if you want to engage the reader. But if you don't keep your mind open to the unexpected, you'll miss out on the fun of writing. If you insist upon controlling every detail of the first draft, or if you're afraid to start over, you'll shut the door to your imagination.

This also applies to writers who agonize over selling their books before they're even written. They worry so much about the potential market for a piece (Is the subject too controversial? Is the age of the main character correct for the readership? Will my favorite publisher like this book?) that they back their creativity into a corner. When writing the first draft of a manuscript, I think it's a bad idea to imagine anyone ever reading it. This is a journey you're traveling alone, and when an unexpected guest knocks at the door, only you will know if you're brave enough to let him in.

Of course, some writing requires a bit of advanced planning. There's a man in my town who creates a unique type of artwork, and I'd like to profile him for a children's magazine. Before I ask him for an interview, I'm spending a day deciding on possible markets for the article. This will help me determine the age group of the piece, the slant I'll take, and what photographs I'll need. I'll come up with three or four possible approaches to the profile, and pitch these angles to him when I call. This will not only prepare him for the interview, but also show him I'm serious about writing the article. However, since I've never met this man, if he turns out to be an eccentric crackpot I'm prepared to go with the flow.

All writing is a balancing act between fancy and framework, between taking an idea that exists only for you and making it real for thousands of readers. If you don't put restrictions on your inspiration, you'll have the luxury of being able to sort out the good from the bad, of choosing what remains in your book, and what goes. If, at the beginning of the process, your expectations are few, you'll have plenty to change. Whether or not my article ever gets published, it will still be fun to spend the day with someone whose art fascinates me and to try to bring this work alive for young readers. I'll challenge myself to give my writing what Madeleine L'Engle calls "free will," and, if I'm lucky, I'll be surprised by the result.

This article excerpted from Children's Book Insider, The Newsletter for Children's Writers. [Visit now](#) for more info and a special offer.

Writing for Magazines by Laura Backes

You may have noticed the kind testimonial for Children's Book Insider from Lorri Cardwell-Casey in Item 7 and wondered if your eyes deceived you. Does Lorri

really have 450 magazine credits? Yep. That's because Lorri is talented, works hard and knows that magazines offer real opportunities for writers to see their work in print. It sometimes seems that all the children's writers out there are battling one another for that rare and precious opportunity to get their picture book published, all the while magazine editors are desperately seeking fresh, good content. Smart writers know where the opportunity is, and how to make the most of it. You may someday get that picture book contract but, while you wait, why not build a great career sharing your work with kids around the world via magazines? Here's Laura's take on how to get started...

It can take a beginner many months (or years) to finally break into the children's book fiction market. If you yearn to see your name in print, why not go where there's less competition? Let's explore the hottest opportunities in writing magazine articles.

Nonfiction can be profitable because you can use the same research on several pieces. Find a topic you love, gather your information, and then craft several articles for different markets. Remember that children are most interested in the "how" and "why" of a subject, especially if you present it in a humorous or unique way.

Longer how-to articles. These differ from straight activities because they require more of an introduction than, "Have you ever wanted to make paper dolls? Here's how!" Many magazines have theme lists for each issue, and want activities that also present information related to the theme. That same paper doll activity might be prefaced by several paragraphs on the history of paper dolls in the U.S., or focus on paper dolls manufactured during a particular decade. The "how-to" element would follow, with clear, step-by-step instructions children can complete on their own, or with minimal adult supervision.

How-to articles for older readers might involve self-help topics, or tips for improving relationships, getting organized, or landing a summer job. Break these more abstract topics into several steps and use catchy subheads to keep the article entertaining.

Interviews and profiles. You don't have to look far to find subjects to profile for magazines. Many publications want articles about kids doing interesting or unusual things. Research potential markets before finding your subjects, as each magazine's audience and focus differs. Interviews with adults in your community who have unusual jobs or ordinary people who are making a difference in the world are also good subjects. Center your interview questions around areas the magazine's target audience would find most fascinating.

Biographies. Many magazines need short biographies of adults whose lives are connected to themes for upcoming issues. When writing a magazine biography, focus on a small aspect of the person's life, such as a pivotal childhood experience that inspired him to take a certain path in adulthood, or the one or two accomplishments for which that person is best known. Or, for famous subjects,

highlight some obscure achievements. Many magazines love to receive biographies of unknown people who had an impact on a big moment in history.

Feature articles. If you enjoy research and are passionate about a topic, wait until you uncover some new, interesting, or tantalizing facts that would fascinate kids. Then study several recent issues of magazines for different age groups to determine which publications might be interested in a feature article on your subject. Many nonfiction editors prefer to see a query letter describing the article, the age group, and the slant you're planning to take on the topic before you write the entire piece. Note the format of each publication you're querying so you can mention any necessary sidebars, graphs, timelines or photos you'd need to provide.

Reviews. Some magazines have regular departments that take freelance reviews of children's software, video games, books, or other products. Check the magazine's guidelines before submitting any reviews, as sometimes they're staff-written or written by kids. Also note if the reviews are targeted to the children reading the magazine, or to their parents.

Regardless of the type of magazine nonfiction you write, your best chance for publication is if you custom-fit each submission. Study each magazine's style, note if the articles tend to be light and humorous or have a more scholarly tone. Design your submission to look as if it belongs in the magazine by including sidebar material or photographs, if needed. Give the editor something she can use, but written in a way she's never seen before.

(PS: Another great opportunity: e-zines. Many print publications have a separate online version that takes original material. Other e-zines are independent companies with no affiliation to print magazines. Some pay contributors, others simply offer exposure and a publishing credit. Most e-zines only want onetime electronic rights to the material. Be sure to read any agreements carefully and keep the copyright to your work in your name. One source for children's e-zines is the Yahoo! Directory of Kids' Magazines at http://dir.yahoo.com/Society_and_Culture/Cultures_and_Groups/Children/News_for_Kids/Magazines.)

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Need Help? We've Got Solutions...

- Need insider secrets and fresh markets for your manuscript? Check out Children's Book Insider, the Newsletter for Children's Writers at <http://write4kids.com/aboutcbi.html>

- Just getting started and need a friendly, step-by-step guide to becoming a children's author? Check out Career Starter, The Beginner's Guide to Writing for Children at <http://write4kids.com/starter.html>
- Have you written a story but don't know what to do next? I've Written a Story, What Do I Do Now? tells you what you need to know about submitting your manuscript to publishers efficiently and professionally. <http://write4kids.com/nowwhat.html>
- Tired of getting rejection letters? Improving The Odds reveals the manuscript-revision secrets of top authors that help push them over the top. <http://write4kids.com/odds.html>
- Need to know how to write a killer query or cover letter that gets noticed? Author to Editor collects actual letters used by top authors that resulted in publishing contracts. Full analysis and lots of easy-to-apply tips help make writing the perfect query or cover letter a breeze. <http://write4kids.com/a2e.html>
- Having trouble developing a plot? Crafting strong characters? Coming up with good story ideas? Our In-Depth Workshop Series goes in-depth to make you a stronger and more confident writer. <http://write4kids.com/indepth.html>
- Care to hear—first-hand—the best advice superstar authors have to give for aspiring children's writers? In Their Own Words offers exclusive insight from Lois Lowry, Judy Blume, R.L. Stine, Chris Crutcher and many, many more. This is pure gold and available nowhere else. <http://write4kids.com/itow.html>

And there's more. For a full listing, just go to <http://write4kids.com/collect.html>

Turn Your Ideas Into Books by Laura Backes

Maybe you're one of those lucky writers whose head is bursting with ideas. Or perhaps you have one idea that's been nagging you for weeks, always at the edge of your thoughts. Either way, you're itching to begin writing. That's good. But before you rush headlong into your story, stop and ask yourself one question: Is this just an idea, or is it a book?

Ideas, of course, are the seeds of any work of fiction or nonfiction. But until an idea is fully developed, until you can envision its beginning, middle and end, that one idea might not be enough. The experience of writing for pages about an idea and ultimately getting nowhere (or getting a pile of rejections) has taught many

writers to outline their books before they begin. But if the thought of an outline sends shivers up your spine, at least thinking your idea through and making sure it merits months of writing can save you future frustration.

Ideas for Fiction

A lot of writers, especially when they're beginners, get ideas for fiction from their own lives. This can be useful for several reasons: you're emotionally invested in the topic, you can relate directly to the main character, and if the situation actually happened to you, you're less likely to be unconsciously basing the story on a book you've read. But remember, just because you find this thing that happened to you or your child fascinating, it doesn't mean it will be fascinating to thousands of potential readers. Very often, a real-life event is just that—an event. It's a vivid scene you recall with pleasure, or a family joke that's repeated over and over. It evokes strong emotions when you remember it, perhaps you even look back on an event as a turning point in your life. But only rarely does reality provide a plot.

When writers stick too closely to what really happened they fail to develop the elements necessary for a good story: a believable main character who is faced with a problem or conflict, mounting tension as that character tries to solve her problem and experiences setbacks, and a tension-filled high point followed by a resolution that's satisfying to the character and the reader. If your main character is really your son, you might not want to get him in trouble or throw rocks in his path. But you have to. It's the only way you'll create a story that will keep readers hooked and wondering how it will end.

Speaking of endings, if the resolution of your story comes too easily, it's probably obvious and predictable. Try mixing up real life and have the situation evolve in a different direction. Surprise yourself, and you'll surprise an editor.

However you get your idea, focus first on whether it's a plot or a theme. Many times, an initial idea is really the underlying meaning of the story, what the author wants to convey to the reader. Themes should be universal in their appeal—such as friendship, appreciating one's own strengths, not judging others too quickly. Then play around with the sequence of events until you develop a plot (what actually happens in the book) that makes this theme clear to the reader. And remember; if you're using a childhood incident as the foundation of your story, tell it from your childhood viewpoint, not how it feels to you now as an adult.

Ideas for Nonfiction

Your nonfiction book should be based on something you're truly interested in and passionate about. After all, you'll be living with this idea for many months. The key to successful nonfiction is to take your idea and approach it in a way that no one else has ever done before. This means doing most of your research before you begin to write. Don't settle for the most easily-found information on your topic—your readers have probably read the same information. Keep digging until you find an aspect to your subject that strikes you as unique. Then search

through the library and book stores to make sure no one else has already beat you to it.

For a nonfiction idea to become a book, you need enough information to fill the number of pages necessary, depending on the age group for which you plan to write. Younger children need a foundation of basic facts, but you can also get fairly detailed within the scope of the approach you've chosen as long as you explain concepts in a simple and straightforward manner (how animals hibernate, why insects are different colors). Older readers can draw on a broader foundation of knowledge, and infer connections between your topic and related subjects. A detailed outline of any nonfiction book is essential to help you see if your idea has enough substance and originality, or if you need further research before you begin writing.

Whether it's fiction or nonfiction, your idea should mean something to you, but also have the potential to mean a lot to your readers. Think it through, add to it, take the nonessential elements away, and make sure it has a beginning, middle and end. Only then will your "idea" turn into "an idea for a book."

This article excerpted from Children's Book Insider, The Newsletter for Children's Writers. [Visit now](#) for more info and a special offer.

Your Real Odds of Getting Published by Laura Backes

Most beginning writers are curious about their chances of ever seeing their work in print. Editors have told me that a mid- to large-sized publishing house gets upwards of 5000 unsolicited submissions a year. About 95% are rejected right off the bat (most get form letters, a few promising authors get personalized notes stating why the manuscript was rejected). Of the 5% left, some are queries for which the editors request entire manuscripts. Others are manuscripts submitted in their entirety, and these go on to the next stage of the acquisitions process (get passed around the editorial department, presented at editorial meetings, perhaps looked at by sales staff to get a sense of the market for the book). The end result is that 1-2% of unsolicited submissions are actually purchased for publication.

But, you ask, if so few manuscripts are bought from the slush pile, why are so many new books are published each year? The unsolicited "slush" comes from authors the editors have never worked with before: new writers and those who don't have agents. Experienced writers and those who have already published with that house make up the rest of the list.

Before you trash your computer and take up knitting, let's put this all in perspective. Most manuscripts are rejected because they're just plain bad. The stories are trite, the characters wooden, the endings predictable. The plots may smack of didacticism or patronize the young reader. Authors who don't understand the basic rules of grammar or who can't send a properly formatted manuscript won't get a close look. Those who submit their work to every publisher listed in Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market instead of taking the time to target publishers appropriate for their work add substantially to the glut of publishers' mail (and the eventual banning of unsolicited submissions by some houses).

If you take the time to learn how to write a strong story with multifaceted characters, your manuscript will rise to the top. If you study the age group for which you want to write, and keep the length and content appropriate for your audience, your work will stand out. If you watch the current market and find a niche you can fill, an editor is more likely to give you careful consideration.

One more point: General fiction is the most competitive genre in any age group of children's books. It's also the most subjective, meaning your manuscript has to appeal to exactly the right editor. If you have any interest in nonfiction and can approach a topic in a unique, entertaining way, you'll be a bigger fish in a much smaller pond. Or, try narrowing your niche so your work stands out from the ocean of fiction: write historical fiction for beginning readers, funny mysteries for middle grades, science fiction for young adults. Stretching your writing beyond general fiction will give you a "hook" and also help you zero in on publishers who want exactly what you've got.

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Cool Tool: Kids' Magazine Writers

The editors of the new Kids' Magazine Writers site note that those who choose to build their careers writing for magazines rather than pursuing book contracts are "the redheaded stepchildren of the children's writing world" and "suffer from a bit of an inferiority complex". They've got a point—writing for periodicals is often viewed as a "stepping stone" to "real publishing". That, of course, is utter hogwash. The arrival of a favorite magazine in the mailbox is the highlight many a child's month, and the stories contained within are devoured with equal relish as those found in some high-falutin' picture book.

That's one reason why we're always happy to present our "magazine maven" Margaret Shauers' latest news, along with her comprehensive "Children's Writer's Marketplace" column (you can find the most recent on online at <http://write4kids.com/wmarket/>). And it's also why we're glad to see Kids' Magazine Writers make its debut.

The site features articles, writing tips, inspirational articles and a very nice web directory of magazines with direct links to publishers' websites. This is certainly a resource to enjoy now and to keep an eye on as it grows.

To visit, go to <http://www.kidmagwriters.com>

Exclusive Free eBook for Updaters - "The Art of Writing"

(In case you missed it last month—we've created a special, exclusive gift just for Updaters! here's the info....)

In 1905, the master of adventure literature, Robert Louis Stevenson, decided to share his writing secrets. His book *Essays on the Art of Writing* told the behind-the-scenes story of the creation of *Treasure Island* and other classics. His advice is timeless and absolutely essential to anyone wishing to write for young readers.

The original is near impossible to find, with antique copies fetching a fortune in rare book shops. But here's the good news: we've arranged to offer an eBook version of this classic work...and it's absolutely free to all Update readers!

The eBook is in PDF format, readable by Windows and Mac computers, and it's yours for the downloading. Just head over to <http://www.write4kids.com/ebooks.html> , scroll down and get your copy.

It's our gift to you for being a loyal Update reader. Enjoy!

Free Article Search Tool

Here's a fantastic free research tool that should be a major boon to all writers:

FindArticles.com is a vast archive of published articles that you can search for free. Constantly updated, it contains articles dating back to 1998 from more than 300 magazines and journals. You will find articles on a range of topics, including business, health, society, entertainment, sports and more. Each of the hundreds of thousands of articles in FindArticles can be read in its entirety and printed at

no cost.

This is the sort of service that would cost hundreds of dollars to access in the pre-internet days. Just another example of how the wired world makes life so much easier for writers!

<http://www.findarticles.com>

Google Print Now Online

If you've used Amazon recently, you may have fooled around with their "Look Inside" feature, that allows visitors to peek inside the pages of many of their book titles. Now Google has introduced a similar service, and it may prove helpful to authors seeking to promote their book.

Here's how Google describes the service:

Google Print enables publishers to promote their books on Google. Google scans the full text of participating publishers' titles so that Google users can see books that match the topics that they are searching on. When a user clicks on a book search result, they're taken to a Google-hosted web page displaying a scanned image of the relevant page from the book. Each page also contains multiple 'Buy this Book' links, allowing users to purchase the book from online retailers.

We may also show contextually-targeted Google AdWords ads on these pages. Publishers will receive a share of the revenue generated from ads appearing on their content.

There are many benefits to participating in Google Print. As a Google Print publisher, you can:

- * Promote your book for free on Google
- * Increase book sales at traditional and online booksellers
- * Expand your reach to targeted customers
- * Tap into a new high growth revenue stream: contextual advertising

For all the details, go to <https://print.google.com/publisher/>

For a review of the service from the Author's Guild, go to http://www.authorsguild.org/news/google_launches_browse.htm

Great Resource for Writers of Jewish Books

Author Anna Olswanger has compiled a superb resource all about writing and publishing books and articles of Jewish interest. Anna provides helpful articles,

news about publishers and conferences and much more. You can also sign up to receive the eZine Jewish Book Publishing News and read back issues online.

A fine and unique resource. Check it out at <http://www.olswanger.com/>

Health Insurance Tips for Writers

Laura and I love almost everything about working for ourselves. The fly in the ointment: the ridiculously expensive cost of obtaining decent health insurance. Here are some of the lessons we've learned that may help you get health insurance, or greatly improve your current rate and/or coverage situation.

1. Shop Around. It's amazing how much variance there is between insurance carriers. It pays—big time—to compare coverage and premiums. This can be quite time consuming, but there's a very easy way to get it all done. Just use the free eHealthInsurance online service to do all your comparisons at once. (They also offer comparisons for dental coverage.) Even if you currently have health coverage, using this service may still save you a great deal of money. Click to visit eHealthInsurance

2. Consider Higher Deductibles. If you're a relatively healthy person, it might pay to go with higher deductibles and pocket the savings. Here's a good idea: take the amount you save in premiums and put it in the bank, to use against medical bills. If you end up not needing it, that's money in your hands—not the insurance company's.

3. Look into Medical Savings Accounts. Combining high deductible policies with a savings plan similar to an IRA, Medical Savings Accounts are an intriguing option for the self-employed. Here are two articles with lots of good info:

<http://planning.yahoo.com/msa.html>

<http://moneycentral.msn.com/articles/insure/health/1423.asp>

4. Ask your state about "safety net" programs. Many states offer health insurance at fair prices for those who cannot otherwise get reasonable coverage. Visit <http://www.healthinsuranceinfo.net> to learn what's available in your state.

Help for Young Writers

One of the most common e-mails we receive is from a parent whose son or daughter has expressed an interest in having their writings published. Here are three great places to start:

There are number of outlets to publish a child's work. Numerous magazines and publishers do accept submissions from kids ages 8-18, and the best place to find them is in a book called "The Young Writer's Guide to Getting Published" by Kathy Henderson.

An excellent "portal" site for young writers can be found at <http://kidswriting.about.com/> Plenty of links, articles and encouragement for budding wordsmiths.

We've also just learned about a site called chixLit, a literary 'zine that publishes work by girls ages 7 to 17. Pay them a visit at <http://www.chixlit.com> to view their guidelines.

How Find Publishers for Your Manuscripts

Finding the right publisher for your work involves a bit of detective work. A story that's wrong for one house may be perfect for another. To conduct your search for publishers, follow these steps:

- Get a copy of Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market (Writer's Digest Books). It's a thorough listing of every important children's publisher, listing needs, personnel and more. For more info about this essential resource, go to <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1582971919/ref%3Dnosim/childrensbookinsA/104-7199350-2083107>
- Subscribe to a publication that will keep you informed of changes, new imprints and changing publisher needs. At Children's Book Insider, we devote the first two pages of each issue to such market news. CBI is also the official update source for Children's Writers & Illustrators Market, providing page-referenced changes, corrections and updates throughout the year.
- Spend lots of time in your local bookstore, reading newer books. Look, in particular, for books that have a similar tone or theme as your manuscript. Note the name and address of the publishing company, and send for their catalog and writer's guidelines.
- Join a writers' group. You'll be able to access the dossier of information many experienced children's writers have compiled about publishing houses.
- Scan the Web for publishers online. Here are two places to start: <http://www.bookmarket.com/childrens.html>
<http://cbcbooks.org/html/memberlist.html>

Before sending your manuscript to any publisher, it's vital that you first send a self-addressed stamped envelope requesting their current writer's guidelines. Knowing exactly what a publisher is seeking, and how they wish to be contacted will save you a great deal of time and aggravation. (Note: many publishers now post their guidelines on their websites, saving you the trouble of sending in for them. If you're targeting a publisher, visit their website first, to view their current catalog and access these guidelines.)

How to Contact Almost Any Celebrity

Wanna get a famous person to give your book a testimonial “blurb”? Would getting a comment or two from a celebrity push your manuscript over the top? Would you simply like to correspond with a public figure whom you admire? There are many reasons why authors can benefit from being in touch with celebrities. The hard part has always been finding out how to reach them. A young man named Jordan McAuley is providing a really neat solution.

An autograph collector, Jordan became something of an expert at tracking down celebrity addresses. Now, through his site Contact Any Celebrity, he's making his knowledge available to all. I was especially struck by the testimonial from HarperCollins's Corporate Librarian who said the site has helped their editors reach many celebrities.

Certainly worth a visit. Go to <http://wetrack.it/cac/af.cgi?128> and have a look!

Incredible Resource Gives Insight About Your Audience

One of the keys to making it as a children's writer: understanding kids. Now, thanks to the U.S. Census, a treasure trove of information is available at no cost about America's children. Kids Count, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is a national and state-by-state effort to track the status of children in the U.S. The site offers a complete state-by-state breakdown of a variety of demographic facts about our kids, including Income and poverty, Parental employment, Education, Language, Disability, Neighborhood characteristics , Age and Sex , Race, Origin and Living arrangements. It's a remarkable way to learn about your audience—how they live and who they are.

Here's another idea—if you're crafting a query or cover letter trying to sell the idea for your book or story, back up your arguments with data from the site (e.g. if you've written a book about a child who speaks one language at home and another at school, you might say “With more than 9.7 million children in families where a language other than English is spoken at home (source: US Census 2000), this book is timely and important”). You'll find Kids Count at <http://www.aecf.org/kidscount/census/>

New Website Gives Children's Books to Kids Worldwide

A group of non-profit agencies has teamed to create a library of children's books, available at no cost to kids, librarians, teachers and parents worldwide. The International Children's Digital Library has embarked on a five-year, \$4.4 million plan to build a digital library of 10,000 children's books drawn from 100 cultures.

The site launched on November 20 with a selection of more than 200 titles in 15 different languages. The library will give children in economically disadvantaged and geographically isolated areas access to great literature.

For more details about this highly worthwhile project, go to <http://www.icdlbooks.org/>

Now It's Easy To Tell a Friend About the Update

We receive many kind words about the Update, and a good number of you wonder whether it's OK to pass the newsletter on to a friend. We're honored that you enjoy the Update, and we're happy to grant permission to forward the newsletter to another writer who would benefit from it.

And, to make life easier for those of you who'd like to share the Update, we've set up a special page where you can tell a friend about the Update and include a personal message. Just go to

<http://write4kids.com/reco.html>

It will just take a second and you'll make a writing buddy very happy!

Online Booklists That Save Countless Hours

It cannot be stated often enough: to write great children's books, you must read great children's books.

Only by becoming completely familiar with the style, cadence and techniques of successful children's writers can you someday hope to join their ranks. However, the task of locating outstanding books in your chosen age group and genre can be a hit or miss proposition—your local librarian and bookseller are good starts, and there's always the award winners. But beyond that, things can get difficult.

Fortunately, the Internet is awash with resources that make locating outstanding books to study a snap. Here are some of my top choices:

75 Authors/Illustrators Everyone Should Know

<http://www.cbcbooks.org/html/75authors.html>

100 Picture Books Everyone Should Know

<http://www2.nypl.org/home/branch/kids/reading/recommended2.cfm?ListID=61>

Books About Children with Disabilities

<http://www.math.ttu.edu/~dmettler/dlit.html>

Children's Choices, Teachers' Choices, and Young Adults' Choices

<http://www.reading.org/choices/>

Children's Classics <http://www.hbook.com/childclass1.shtml>

Teenreads.com YA Reviews <http://www.teenreads.com/reviews/index.asp>

Vandergriff's Children's Literature Page

<http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/%7Ekvander/ChildrenLit/index.html>

And don't forget last month's featured resource, the Database of Award-Winning Children's Literature at <http://www.dawcl.com>

Online Resources for Children's Writers

This month, I've got two new resources I've come across, and two all-time classics that every writer should have bookmarked....

The New:

Print on Demand is a hot topic, and I haven't seen a better site devoted to this important development than the 21st century Publishing Update at <http://julieduffy.com/>. The site features many articles of interest to self-publishers and other DIY types and is well worth a visit.

If you're a stay-at-home parent struggling to juggle your home life with your writing career, you'll appreciate WriteFromHome.com. The site offers a collection of articles to "help manage kids & clips under one roof". Pay them a visit at <http://writefromhome.com>

The Classics:

PublishersWeekly.com is an essential stop for anyone interested in the publishing field. Articles, reviews, bestseller lists and much more. The Children's

Book industry is given considerable coverage. A must-visit.

<http://PublishersWeekly.com>

The American Library Association's famed Booklist magazine, featuring authoritative book reviews from every genre, is now available online. Children's book reviews, interviews, articles on topics of interest to youth librarians, essays by children's book authors, bibliographies and Top 10 genre lists are all found on the site. http://www.ala.org/BKL_Template.cfm?Section=booklist

This month, we've got another great book review site and some cool research links.....

Through the Looking Glass Children's Book Review has reviews of children's books of all genres. The website also includes author profiles, organization and publisher information and profiles, and features on a wide variety of topics.

Stop by at <http://www.lookingglassreview.com>

Deep Web Searching. For most web searches, Google and Yahoo! do the trick quite nicely. However, there's a huge chunk of the web these and other popular search engines never reach. If you're researching a subject for your writing, it pays to go deep and dig into academic resources, archived text, bibliographies and other corners of the Internet the big guys won't search.

Here's where to go when you need to conduct a deep search:

CompletePlanet A killer reference tool. Will lead you to entire databases and collections that are almost impossible to find on your own.

<http://completeplanet.com>

ProFusion. Nicely organized. Especially good for searching government resources. <http://www.profusion.com>

Invisible Web. Great for bibliographies, library catalog, reference collections and more. <http://www.invisible-web.net>

Happy hunting!

This month, we've got an interesting site for those of you who like to use the "I'm too busy to write" excuse....

Writing on the Run features tips and articles dedicated to one thing: fitting writing into a busy personal schedule. Many of the tips are quite ingenious, and visitors are invited to submit their own ideas. It's a fun site and, appropriately enough, it won't take too much of your time for a productive visit.

Stop by at <http://www.writingontherun.com>

This month, we've got two good children's book review sites to check out. It's vital to stay on top of the market, and to sift the quality books from the rest. Smart reviewers can help do just that. (And, if you've published or self-published a book, be sure to get it reviewed at these sites!)

The Reading Tub. Includes at-a-glance profiles of books for all ages, and opinions from kids and parents about the books. <http://www.thereadingtub.com>
Sonderbooks. A well organized, comprehensive collection of reviews.

<http://sonderbooks.com>

Three more killer sites to check out!

Writing-World.com. Children's Book Insider contributing editor Moira Allen has created one of the best all-around writing sites on the 'net. Writing-World is packed with articles, advice and instruction. Carve some time out of your schedule for a visit—you'll be there a good long while. <http://writing-world.com>

[Verla](http://www.verlakay.com) Kay's Website. Successful author Verla Kay has put together an impressive resource for children's writers. The site's chatroom has hosted a number of very useful sessions, and the transcripts are available online. <http://www.verlakay.com>

Indispensible Writing Resources. An good jumping-off point for writers of all stripes. Particularly strong in leading visitors to top research sites. <http://www.quintcareers.com/writing/index.html>

Two more killer sites to check out:

Children's Literature Calendar. We've mentioned the marvelous [childrenslit.com](http://www.childrenslit.com) site before. Here's something very valuable on the site that you may have missed. Their calendar of upcoming children's literature events is an excellent resource, listing upcoming conferences, festivals, industry conventions and much more. And where else would you be able to discover that August 8 is Bad Poetry Reading Day? http://www.childrenslit.com/sites_events.html

Through the Looking Glass Children's Book Reviews. This is an ambitious new site filled with insightful children's book reviews and other resources for kidlit lovers. An excellent way to discover what's in the market, and a good place to get your books reviewed. <http://www.lookingglassreview.com>

Guidelines Search. Magazines and book publishers create printed guidelines to inform prospective authors of how, when and where they prefer to be contacted with story ideas and manuscript submissions. Getting your hands on a publisher's guidelines is absolutely essential before submitting. The Internet makes it easy to get guidelines (they're often posted on publisher's websites) and now it just got even simpler. Writer's Digest is offering a free search engine with nothing but writer's guidelines! Check it out at <http://www.writersdigest.com/guidelines.asp> (note: It's still wise to check directly on each publisher's website before submitting. Guidelines do tend to change and you want to make sure you have the most recent version.)

Reference Portal. [writers-free-reference.com](http://www.writers-free-reference.com) is a straightforward and thorough starting point for writers looking to research just about anything. Very useful—<http://www.writers-free-reference.com/>

Plagued by Spyware and Adware?

Getting strange pop-up windows? Has your browser home page been "hijacked" to some unfamiliar site?

You're probably experiencing the joys of spyware and adware, two more pains-in-the-neck for internet users. If you want to rid your computer of these nasties, you should run system scans every couple of days. Doing this, along with keeping an up-to-date anti-virus program on the job at all times, will help protect you.

Here are two excellent programs that I use to keep spyware and adware at bay:

Spybot Search & Destroy: <http://www.safer-networking.org/en/spybotsd/index.html>

AdAware: <http://www.lavasoftusa.com/software/adaware/>

We have nothing to do with either product—they're just really good tools that every internet user should know about.

Resource Alert: Disability in Children's Books

The need for realistic and sensitive portrayals of disability in children's literature has been a major topic over the past few years. If you're interested to know the "state of the art" on the subject, you should check out the "Disability Culture in Children's Literature" edition of Disability Studies Quarterly. This issue, free to access over the web, is packed with outstanding papers and essays, including "An Examination into the Portrayal of Deaf Characters and Deaf Issues in Picture Books for Children", "Devices and Desires: Science Fiction, Fantasy and Disability in Literature for Young People", "Butterflies: Youth Literature as a Powerful Tool in Understanding Disability", "Children's Literature That Includes Characters With Disabilities or Illnesses" and many more.

This is important and timely information every children's book author should be aware of. Go to www.dsq-sds.org and follow the link to "Current Issue" link.

Thinking About Self-Publishing a Children's Picture Book?

For quite a while, we've been looking to add a book to the Write4Kids collection that dealt with the topic of self-publishing. While there are many terrific books about the subject in general, we haven't really found much specific to self-publishing a children's book.

Now we have, and it's a great, great resource.

Could You, Should You Self-Publish a Picture Book?, by Anne Emerick, is an

eBook that quite frankly knocked us out. Anne offers page after page of insight, instruction and advice, along with scores of links and recommendations for even more resources. This is the perfect guide for anyone considering self-publishing, and we're proud to offer it to our customers.

It's cheap (just \$15.95), really thorough and you can download it instantly (and with all the clickable web links it contains, you'll definitely appreciate the fact that it's an eBook!).

For more info, and to take a look at the eBook's table of contents, go to <http://write4kids.com/could.html>

Want to Reach Homeschoolers? Here's One Way

If you've self-published a book, you know that the homeschool market is growing and lucrative. The issue: how to reach parents who homeschool with news about your book.

Here's an interesting resource we came across:

Tim's Great Stuff, inc. is a convention bag stuffing service for Home School Fairs and Conventions throughout the United States. They claim to stuff more than 100,000 bags each year. This is a good method of putting your flyer directly into the hands of homeschoolers. <http://www.timgreatstuff.com/>

We've Got a Very Cool Gift For You!

Since summer is about over, it's now time to get back to serious writing. To help get you motivated, we've got a nifty little gift for each of you. It's a Toolbar that fits right into your Internet Explorer browser, and is specially designed for children's writers. All the best sites and children's writing resources will now be at your fingertips 24/7!

The toolbar also features:

- a Google search box
- a popup killer
- a cookie remover
- and a button that allows you to translate any page from one language to another.

Pretty cool, eh?

The Toolbar is a 100% no-catches freebie.

To get your copy, just go to <http://write4kids.com/toolbar.html> (note: the Toolbar will only work on Windows computers. Sorry Mac folks!)

What Do Editors Want?

That's pretty much the \$64,000 question for aspiring writers, isn't it? Understanding what editors are looking for can be the key to a successful career. We've got some answers in the latest article posted to our website. It's titled, appropriately enough, "What Do Editors Want?" You'll find it at <http://write4kids.com/editors.html> (and while you're visiting, be sure to poke around the rest of the library—we've got scores of articles that you're sure to enjoy).

Need Help? We've Got Solutions...

- Need insider secrets and fresh markets for your manuscript? Check out Children's Book Insider, the Newsletter for Children's Writers at <http://write4kids.com/aboutcbi.html>
- Just getting started and need a friendly, step-by-step guide to becoming a children's author? Check out Career Starter, The Beginner's Guide to Writing for Children at <http://write4kids.com/starter.html>
- Have you written a story but don't know what to do next? I've Written a Story, What Do I Do Now? tells you what you need to know about submitting your manuscript to publishers efficiently and professionally. <http://write4kids.com/nowwhat.html>
- Tired of getting rejection letters? Improving The Odds reveals the manuscript-revision secrets of top authors that help push them over the top. <http://write4kids.com/odds.html>
- Need to know how to write a killer query or cover letter that gets noticed? Author to Editor collects actual letters used by top authors that resulted in publishing contracts. Full analysis and lots of easy-to-apply tips help make writing the perfect query or cover letter a breeze. <http://write4kids.com/a2e.html>
- Having trouble developing a plot? Crafting strong characters? Coming up with good story ideas? Our In-Depth Workshop Series goes in-depth to make you a stronger and more confident writer. <http://write4kids.com/indepth.html>
- Care to hear—first-hand—the best advice superstar authors have to give for aspiring children's writers? In Their Own Words offers exclusive insight from Lois Lowry, Judy Blume, R.L. Stine, Chris Crutcher and many, many more. This is pure gold and available nowhere else. <http://write4kids.com/itow.html>

And there's more. For a full listing, just go to <http://write4kids.com/collect.html>

VIEW THE CURRENT UPDATE ONLINE AT
<http://write4kids.com/update.html>