

PICTURE BOOK GOLDMINE



Children's Book Insider

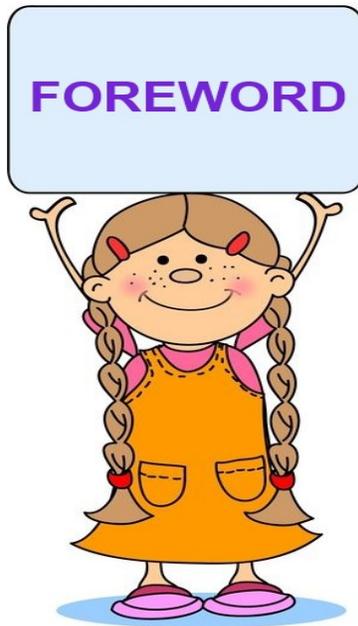
Picture Book Goldmine edited by Laura Backes, Publisher, Children's Book Insider, the Children's Writing Monthly

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This ebook brings together some of the best articles that have appeared in the pages of *Children's Book Insider*, *The Children's Writing Monthly* on the subject of picture books.

While the way picture books get published may be evolving, the ingredients that come together to create great picture books remain unchanged. And, I think we can agree that there's nothing more magical than a truly wonderful picture book.

You're about to discover some of those ingredients, and we invite you to experiment, have fun and let your creativity run free. It's our hope that this collection will inspire you to create your own picture book masterpiece!

Laura

Laura Backes
Fort Collins, Colorado

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What is a Picture Book?

By Laura Backes

Publisher, Children's Book Insider, The Children's Writing Monthly

A child's first experience with books is the picture book. Though we call the audience "readers", in reality picture books are meant to be read **to** the child. The text is short enough to encompass a whole story without taxing the young child's attention span. The illustrations on every page enhance the words and give the child something to look at while listening to the story.

Picture books are broken into several general age groups:

Board books, fiction and nonfiction: 8-24 pages long, paper over board format, written for infants and toddlers. Minimal text (0-200 words). Lots of concrete action and familiar situations. Can also teach concepts (colors, shapes, identifying animals, etc.), and may have lift-the-flaps, touch-and-feel or sound elements. Most are written by the illustrator.

Picture books for ages 2-5 or 3-6, fiction and nonfiction: 32 pages, up to about 600 words. Text and illustrations on each page. Very simple stories based on familiar routines, or simple nonfiction related to a young child's world. Rhyming or rhythmic language, lots of action, minimal dialogue. These are often linear stories (see below).

Picture books for ages 4-8, fiction and nonfiction: Average 32 pages (occasionally will go to 40 pages for older end of the audience), up to about 1000 words, color illustrations. Fiction genres are wide open (humor, realistic, fantasy, historical fiction, adventure, etc.). Nonfiction includes biography, history, science, geography, multicultural topics, holidays, animals, interesting professions, art, sports. Most stories for this age have plots (see below).

Fiction picture books for ages 6-10: This is a fairly new category of picture book. The text might be up to 1400 words, with books up to 40 pages.

These stories work well for third through fifth grade classrooms, providing teachers read aloud books that tie in with school subjects. Therefore topics like historical fiction, multicultural stories and current events are prominent.

Nonfiction picture books for ages 8-12: Up to 2000 words and 48 book pages, this is nonfiction in the picture book format for middle grade readers. Books are often illustrated with photographs, or are designed with a variety of artwork (photos, drawings, maps, etc.) and sidebars or boxes of additional information (trivia, jokes, interesting facts, dates, etc.) Some nonfiction picture books have chapters.

Writing Picture Books in a Nutshell

Picture books are not simply short stories; they are an art form in and of themselves. Because they are read out loud to children, the vocabulary isn't controlled (as in a beginning reader that a child would read on his own). However, the text should sound interesting but still be understandable within the context of the story. The job of the author is to create characters, plot and enough emotional tension and drama to keep the pages turning. The description, subtext, and much of the humor is left up to the illustrator. The perfect pairing between author and illustrator creates the entire package, so the reader can't imagine any other pictures illustrating the words, or different words providing the foundation for the art. Done right, the whole is always more than the sum of its parts.

One essential aspect of great picture books is that the main character—whether it's a child, animal, alien, toy, or adult—has the same world view and emotional response to the plot as the reader. You—as the grown-up author—should always remain invisible. How do you do that? Channel your former six-year-old self. Forget your adult experiences and approach the events of the story as if you're living them for the first time. View the world through a child's eyes.

Speaking of child's eyes, always remember that your audience thinks differently than you do. Their brains haven't yet matured to the point where they

can make broad inferences between two abstract concepts. They draw a direct line between cause and effect, and it's always straightforward, concrete and literal. So your stories need to be action-based, and any sophisticated ideas have to be shown in a way that can be *seen* and *illustrated*. If you're unsure of what this all means, read Mem Fox's *Wilfred Gordon MacDonald Partridge* about a young boy who helps an elderly friend with Alzheimer's recover her memories.

Economy of language is a must when writing picture books. Strong, specific nouns and verbs will eliminate the need for most adjectives and adverbs. Simple plots that revolve around one conflict, goal or incident will fit into 1000 words or less. Other than concept books (described in Board Books above), picture book fiction tends to be written in one of two ways:

Plots. Books with plots have a clear beginning, middle and end. Within the first words of the story, your character encounters a problem of some kind or decides to pursue a goal. This is called the story's catalyst.

Then the character makes several attempts to achieve this goal or solve the problem, with gains and setbacks. The best books are ones in which the author is not afraid to get his or her character in trouble. After several attempts the character finally solves his problem in the climax of the book. The resolution (wrap up) happens quickly thereafter, and the story is over once life returns to normal.

The problem or goal has everything to do with who the main character is. It must also be something your readers will care about. The way the character tries to solve his/her problem must also be believable. But the character also learns through his/her efforts; the character grows or changes in some way so that the final attempt at solving the conflict is successful.

The solution must not only be satisfying and surprising to the reader, but also the result of everything that's come before in the story. The character must make that final jump because of his/her own purposeful actions. In other words, you can't have a friend or adult step in and hand over the solution, nor can you have

the character stumble upon the solution through chance or luck.

Linear Stories. Unlike stories with a plot, linear stories (also called incident stories) are made up of a series of incidents that flow from one to the next. Each incident has about the same weight, or importance, in the book. The protagonist moves through the incidents without really changing or learning anything new. So linear stories tend to be about typical days in the protagonist's life, rather than extraordinary days required for a plot.

Linear stories are often bookended by a beginning (waking up, arriving at Grandma's house, leaving for the beach) and an end (going to sleep, leaving Grandma's, watching the sun set at the beach before going home) that creates a satisfying structure (*Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown is a classic example). Or, they may wrap around and end exactly where they started. Laura Joffe Numeroff's popular series beginning with *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* is an example of this "wrap around" format. Or, the book could end with an unexpected punch line on the last page; something the reader never saw coming. This gives the story a satisfying conclusion.

In any event, linear stories only sell if they do something special. The language may be rhythmic and beautiful, the series of events surprising or absurd, or the incidents themselves infused with humor. Books about everyday events in a child's life, told in a straightforward manner, won't sell. They're too ordinary. While kids do want to relate to the main characters in their books, and see bits of themselves in the story, they also want to be taken out of their lives and shown new, imaginative ways of seeing the world.

Other linear books to study are Peggy Rathmann's *10 Minutes Till Bedtime* (an almost wordless linear story), and *Good Night, Gorilla* (a linear bedtime story with a little excitement that helps the tension rise in a couple places). Also check out Mo Willems' hilarious *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!*

It's impossible to teach you everything you need to know about writing picture books in one article, which is why we've compiled this collection of our

best advice on picture books from *Children's Book Insider* over the last few years. Each article breaks down another aspect of creating this unique art form. Some of the information you'll see mentioned more than once, which means it's really important, so take note! Visit the websites of the authors, read the books we've highlighted, and practice, practice, practice. Most importantly, read. Read the books that have been around for more than a generation and try to figure out why they're still so popular. Read books that have been published in the last 15 years, to see what's appealing to kids, parents and editors right now. Analyze the text page by page, note what the author left out but the illustrator put in, and break down how the plots and characters were presented. Above all, pay attention to how these books make you *feel*. That's what you want your readers feeling as well.

Here are some links to picture book lists to get you started. Have fun!

Note: If you don't want to past the long link into your browser, just Google the name of each list.

School Library Journal's Best Picture Books of 2013:

http://www.slj.com/2013/11/reviews/best-of/slj-best-books-2013-picturebooks/#_

Publishers Weekly Best Books of 2013:

<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-book-news/article/59926-pw-s-best-children-s-books-of-2013.html>

ALSC 2013 Notable Children's Books:

<http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/notalists/ncb>

Best Picture Books 2013—Goodreads Choice Awards:

<http://www.goodreads.com/choiceawards/best-picture-books-2013>

**PICTURE BOOK
WRITING
101**



A Beginner's Guide to Writing Picture Books

Many beginners believe writing picture books are a breeze, but it requires a lot of skill to pack a story into a few words. If writing a picture book is your dream, here are some tips to consider before you begin:

Keep it simple. You should be able to sum up the plot of your picture book in three sentences. Not every detail, of course, but the broad strokes. Use one sentence for the beginning (naming your main character and the problem or conflict he'll face in the story), one for the middle (describing the gist of the efforts your character makes to solve his problem), and one for the end (how he finally resolves the conflict and reaches his goal). If three sentences doesn't capture the essence of your plot, then it's probably too complex for a picture book.

Note: You're concentrating here on plot (the action of the story), rather than theme (the underlying message). Don't get into describing theme when you're summarizing your plot. The theme shouldn't even be an issue at this point. You want to construct the story so the character's actions, and how he changes because of those actions, implies a lesson to your readers.

Use only as many secondary characters as are necessary to tell your story. If the book takes place in school, it's not required that you bring your character's family into the plot. At the same time, keep descriptions to a minimum. The illustrator will show what the characters and setting look like. Save your words for plot and dialogue.

Think in pictures. The term "picture books" says it all: the illustrations are just as important as the words. The average picture book is 32 pages long, with about four pages of front matter (title page, copyright page, etc.) So you have 28 pages of text and illustration. If you aim for 1000 words to tell your story (the average length of picture book text), that gives you about 36 words per page

(some pages will have more words, some less, depending on the pacing of your story). While you don't want to obsess over precise word counts when you're writing early drafts of your manuscript, do keep in mind that every page of your book needs to inspire a different illustration. So count out 36 words from your manuscript and note how big a block of text that is on the page. That's about how many words you can devote to each illustration. After that, your characters have to do something—move around, change locations—so the illustrator will have a new picture to draw.

One way to think in pictures is to convey the character's problem, and her efforts to solve that problem, in concrete, visual terms. If your character is having trouble memorizing facts for school, that all takes place inside her head. But if she's embarrassed because she can't swim, then her attempts to learn are easily illustrated.

Note: Some illustrations will span two facing pages, called a two-page spread. In this case, you'll have about 70 words for that one illustration. But picture books are a mix of single page illustrations and two-page spreads, so keep the action moving at a good pace.

Keep a childlike outlook. Picture book characters can be children, adults, animals or fantasy characters. But all main characters must embody the sensibilities of a child between the ages of 4-8. This means the problem your character faces needs to be relevant and important to your target audience. The way your character tackles that problem must fit with the way a child would tackle it. Don't create an adult main character just so you can impose some adult wisdom on your readers. Grown-up characters using the emotional, illogical and sometimes messy coping strategies of children can be a very effective, and funny, storytelling technique. Above all, the character must be the one to solve the problem, using methods that are accessible to children. If readers see themselves in your main character, then they'll understand the underlying message of your story.

Getting Readers to Turn the Pages

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 right-hand 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 page-turning moments 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.

These pacing techniques work just as well for nonfiction picture books, especially if the content has a narrative thread to the information. Here are some books to study: *Water for One, Water for Everyone: A Counting Book of African Animals* by Stephen Swinburne (anticipation through repetition, which works well for younger audiences, with the surprise coming at the end). *Dogteam* by Gary Paulsen (though this is technically considered fiction, the content is reality-based, and Paulsen is a master of flowing text). *Cactus Hotel* by Brenda Guiberson (shows cause and effect through the cycle of life).

The Importance of Conflict in Picture Books

When I first viewed the book trailer for Sarah Lamstein's *Big Night for Salamanders* (<http://sarahlamstein.com/trailer.html>), I was immediately reminded how vital conflict is to any picture book. It opens with a straightforward explanation of the spotted salamanders' nighttime journey from their winter burrows to a woodland pool to mate. Then the tale takes an unexpected turn when Lamstein asks, "But what if something interrupts the salamanders' path to the vernal pool?" What began as an incident quickly turns into a *story*.

Watching book trailers teaches you to pinpoint the conflict in picture books (a quick YouTube search will pull up more than you need). Because trailers are designed to sell the book, they must focus on the story's hook, or what makes it unique. This almost always involves the conflict. If you view several trailers you'll see that "conflict" comes in many forms: sometimes it's dramatic, sometimes it's just a little problem that needs to be creatively solved.

Since the vast majority of manuscripts I've seen during my 23 years of critiquing have been picture books, I always make it a point at writing workshops to stress how crucial conflict is in stories for young kids. And invariably, I get a few raised eyebrows. Sure, someone always asks, young adult books have conflict in spades, but picture books? Shouldn't picture books make kids feel warm and safe and loved? The real world is scary enough, so why add to that fear with books?

Of course we need books that help kids feel safe and loved. Very often these are linear stories; lyrical books without a true plot that focus on a bedtime routine, the relationship between a parent and child, or that teach a concept. Since we have so many of these books already on the market, any new linear story must have a very original hook to make it publishable. A good example is *Mama's Bayou* by Dianne de Las Casas.

But most new writers I meet are creating stories with plots. Their books have

a main character and a story arc with a beginning, middle and end. And the only way those books will ever be successful is if they have conflict.

I think, for some picture book writers, it's really just a problem of semantics. "Conflict" sounds so harsh and violent. It brings to mind images of people yelling and cars exploding in the background. So instead, think of it as a problem for your character to solve, a question to be answered, a mystery to figure out, or a fear to overcome. In other words, conflict is anything that prevents your protagonist from continuing on a straight path through his day (or a salamander from following his instinctual trail to the vernal pool).

Conflict allows young children to become emotionally invested in the story. It creates drama. It means we can't guess what's going to happen until we turn the page. It forces the protagonist to rise to the occasion and be a hero. Conflict turns an ordinary, ho-hum incident (*Dad got dressed for work.*) into a silly situation (*When Dad tried to get dressed for work, he found the new housekeeper had shrunk all his clothes to kid-size.*) Conflict makes books *fun*.

Look at all the picture books on the market today. How many do you think have the theme "You're special"? How many stories involve moving to a new neighborhood, getting a new baby brother or sister, making a friend, or finding one's own particular talents? General book ideas get recycled every season, but the way a plot unfolds can still be fresh if the author does two things: creates a unique character, and gives that character a unique conflict.

If you're writing a picture book right now, try to imagine what the book trailer might be. Most trailers last from 30 to 90 seconds. Does your book have a unique hook that can be highlighted quickly? Is there a dramatic moment that can be pulled out and emphasized with narration or music? If not, you need more conflict. Fiction or nonfiction, the time-tested method for adding conflict to any book is to ask "What if?":

"What if?" can be **embarrassing** (What if Sam can't make it to school on time to get one of the best roles in the Thanksgiving play and has to be an ear of corn?)

"What if?" can be **absurd** (the opening line of David Small's *Imogene's Antlers* reads: "On Thursday, when Imogene woke up, she found she had grown antlers.")

"What if?" can be **scary** (What if Rebecca loses her mom in the shopping mall?)

"What if?" can be **practical**, like Melinda Long's *Pirates Don't Change Diapers*.

"What if?" can give a nonfiction book a unique twist.

The single biggest mistake writers make when developing a picture book idea is to limit their imaginations. Don't ask "What if?" five times. Ask it 50 times. Choose a conflict that's surprising and unpredictable. Choose something that gives your book a hook, your trailer a dramatic focus, and a reason for your story to be read over and over.

Writing Picture Books – Simply Difficult by Nancy Kelly Allen

A 400-word book has to be easy to write, right? As readers, picture books appear simple to create; as writers, we find the task simply difficult. Writing picture books takes a unique set of skills, so try these 10 key points to improve your manuscript:

1. **Short text.** Picture books are based on a single idea. When I first began writing professionally twenty-four years ago, the average picture book text was 1,000-1,500 words. Not anymore. The sweet spot according to many editors is about 450 words. Deleting unnecessary words is a must in today's market.

2. **Audience.** Most picture books are designed for young children up through age five. As adults read the words, children read the pictures. The text should be age appropriate for the audience both in language and interest. A five-year-old has a larger vocabulary and is much more likely to be interested in dinosaurs than a two-year old. Children age six and up are typically exposed to beginning chapter books.

3. **Word choice.** Use action verbs to energize your writing with dramatic impact: "sprint" or "mosey" reveals more than "ran" or "walk." Read your manuscript aloud. Does the text have a rhythm? Do you hear the music of the words? Use poetic devices, such as similes and metaphors, which are pleasing to the ear. Word choice is evident in Judy Schachner's *Skippyjon Jones Cirque De Ole'* when she wrote, "In less time than it takes a flea to fly to Florida..."

4. **Think visually.** Writers are accustomed to creating worlds with words, but in picture books, we have to consider movement for each scene. Provide a change in the movement in each scene to allow the illustrator opportunities to carry the story beyond the text. Rely on action to tell the story.

5. **Numbered scenes.** Most picture books are 32 pages, but only 28-29 pages are used for text. With double-page spreads, the story is told in 14-15 scenes. After writing your story, divide it into scenes (pieces of action). If you have fewer than 14, revise the manuscript. I number the scenes on the manuscript, but remove the numbers before submitting the story. With each page turn, make the reader wonder what will happen next

6. **Story problem.** Fictional picture books come in all shapes and sizes and cover any topic relevant to a child. The character, usually a child or animal, has a problem and makes multiple attempts to solve the problem. In the end the character that is experiencing the problem needs to figure out the solution. The payoff is when the child/animal wins.

7. **Nonfiction literary devices.** Creative nonfiction is a genre that uses literary devices often used by poets and fiction writers. The information is factual with a fun and interesting presentation. Biographies are often written in a creative nonfiction style and many have longer text than the typical picture book. *Strong Man: The Story of Charles Atlas* by Meghan McCarthy is an example.

8. **Speak to both the child and the adult.** Sometimes, children want a particular book read over and over. If the character is creating chaos, aka misbehaving, develop an appropriate ending. If a lesson is learned, keep it subtle. Didactic stories that stress a message or moral don't work in today's market. *Each Kindness* by Jacqueline Woodson offers many lessons for parent and child to discuss as they read the book.

9. **Add humor.** Kids love to giggle. Target the humor to a specific age group. The word "underwear" will make a five-year-old laugh out loud but a toddler won't grasp the wit. The entire narrative doesn't have to be loaded with humor. One funny line may be enough. For the best effect, place the humorous section at

the end of the sentence.

10. **Write the unexpected.** Predictability in picture books can be a worthy format, but the story should not be predictable. Children love to chant repeated phrases, but keep the reader guessing about the plot. After completing the first draft, take your writing from simply difficult to simply fun. Play with the words, tweak them, and make them zing.

Picture books to use as mentor texts:

Django: World's Greatest Jazz Guitarist by Bonnie Christensen

The Sunflower Sword by Mark Sperring

Henry and the Kite Dragon by Bruce Edward Hall

Bear in Love by Daniel Pinkwater

Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type by Doreen Cronin

If You Give a Pig a Pancake by Laura Numeroff

The Granddaughter Necklace by Sharon Dennis Wyeth

Nancy Kelly Allen is the author of over 30 picture books. Her latest are *First Fire: A Cherokee Folktale* and *Amazing Grace: A Kentucky Girl with Gumption in WWII*. Visit her website at <http://www.nancykellyallen.com/> and her very informative Writing Workshop blog at <http://nancykellyallen.blogspot.com/>

Characterization in Picture Books by Jane McBride Choate

You're writing a picture book. Easy, peasy. Right? Wrong. Picture books are among the most difficult books to write. They are also among the most important books in the children's book market for they are the very first books that a child will ever read.

Does that fill you with a sense of responsibility? It does me. Though I haven't written picture books, I have written and published a number (several hundred, in fact) of short stories for small children. Each time, I find myself challenged to write a story that not only entertains but teaches and perhaps even inspires.

If you have set yourself the task of writing a picture book, you're probably already thinking about characterization. This is no less daunting a task than if you are targeting and creating characters for the grade school or young adult age groups.

Your first task should be to read picture books with an eye to memorable main characters and supporting characters. Which ones appeal to you? Why? Which ones do not appeal to you? Why? What kinds of contrasts do you find among the characters?

Picture books lend themselves to several different kinds of characters. Let's explore these types.

Humans. Many picture books use children as their characters. If you have decided to use children as the characters, your first task is to observe. If you don't have a toddler or small child at home, visit a friend or relative who does. See what the children do and how they interact with each other and the adults in their lives. Listen to their vocabulary. Notice how they like to do the same thing over and over. Don't trust your memory. Take notes.

Inanimate objects. Perhaps you've decided that your story is better served by using inanimate objects as your characters. What object should you choose?

Stories range from pumpkins as characters to vehicles (anybody heard of the animated movie *Cars*?). My young grandson is completely entranced with anything *Cars* related. The cars and trucks in the movie and books have truly human qualities. Once again, observe. Even though you aren't using children as characters, you still need to write the characters as if they were human.

Animals. Who among us has not been enchanted with animal characters? Whether it was the movie *Bambi* from decades ago or more recent offerings, books using animal characters continue to delight and teach young readers. Just as in books using inanimate objects as characters, you must bring the animals to life. Give them attributes and qualities with which very young children can relate. Let them feel jealousy and fear and joy and happiness and a myriad of other emotions.

Now that you've decided on the kind of character you'll write, you'll want to name him/her. Give your characters names that young children will be able to pronounce. As lovely a name as Ophelia is, it is probably not the best choice for a character in a picture book.

What about supporting characters? Aside from the main character, you will probably want to have some supporting characters. If your book permits, include a variety of different kinds of secondary characters. Remember: not all supporting characters need to be the same age as the main character. Parents, older brothers and sisters, Sunday School teachers all find their way into picture books.

Make these secondary characters stand out. Does your book feature pumpkins who are hoping to be chosen for jack o'lanterns for Halloween? How can you make one pumpkin different from another? What if the pumpkins are different sizes? What if one is oddly shaped or a different color from the others? It is your job as author to build in contrasts and conflicts in these characters.

Limit the number of characters. Let's go back to our pumpkin example. What if you have a dozen pumpkins each vying for the honor of the family

pumpkin chosen to sit on the front doorstep? Do you have to name and describe each and every pumpkin? No. Choose several who are sufficiently different from each other and give them story status. It's sufficient to say there were "twelve little pumpkins ..."

Creating picture book characters is a demanding task. Do your homework. Read the classics and discover why they have withstood the test of time. Find out what is currently out there.

If you have chosen writing picture books as your contribution to children's literature, give it your very best.

Jane McBride Choate is the author of 32 novels and numerous short stories, essays and articles. She's a CBI Contributing Editor.

Perfect Pacing for Picture Books by Linda Arms White

Okay, I'll admit it. I'm a library voyeur. I love eavesdropping on adults reading picture books to children. The best ones are more of a performance than a reading. A well written book brings out the thespian in each of us. I want my books performed! Pacing is at the core of performance books.

We don't think much of pacing as we are writing, but before your manuscript is submitted to an editor, you should.

Anyone who has taken one of my classes knows I used to write 4000 word picture books. Have you ever tried to cut 3 of every 4 words and have a story left? It ain't easy. These days, I plan first, then write. It helps keep everything, including the pacing of the book, in check.

I figure out what has to happen from the beginning of the story until the end and make a brief outline. Each point on the outline is called a beat.

The general beats at the *story beginning* are:

1. Whatever bit of backstory needed for the reader to understand the story I'm about to tell and introduce the main character.

2. Introduce the problem the character will solve by the end of the book.

The *middle story* beats revolve around the ways the character tries to solve the problem.

3. One way she tries (and fails).

4. Another way she tries (and fails).

5. And yet another try.

The beats of the *story ending* include:

6. The character solves her problem.

7. The wrap-up where any unfinished business is tied up to finish the story with delight.

This sets up the ordered cause and effect list of scenes for your story in just a few phrases or sentences and about 10 minutes time. You've laid out what has to happen but without the detail of how it happens, leaving room for your story to grow organically in the writing itself. You'll likely use fewer words for less important scenes and connecting material, and more for the most important scenes and the ones leading up to them.

Notice there is no room in the outline (or the story) for the mundane. *Harburro sat at the table and played with his food until mom said he could go. Then he put on his purple polka-dot shoes and tied them in a loopy bow. He picked up his backpack and went outside to find someone to play with.* That's 45 words (or 4.5% of 1000 words) that could have been used to advance the story.

Now, we need to write our story using only about 1000 absolutely necessary words in a way we get the most out of every single one of them. We'll introduce the problem no more than 5-10% of the way into the story and solve it about 5% from the end. Now we can begin to see how our word count will lay out.

Within that general pacing are other elements you might choose to further influence the pacing of your story and help the reader interpret how to read it. For example:

- Repetition of words or phrases that the listener waits for and chimes in on.
- Anticipation builds up the suspense as the author withholds information and then reveals it at an unexpected time with surprising material, especially at the story end.
- Flow of words, whether smooth or choppy, influences the speed at which the story is read.
- Page turns determine where the reader takes a breath and stalls slightly as they physically turn to the next page. A page break in the middle of the sentence causes the reader to wait breathlessly for what will be revealed next.

Within scenes you sometimes want to speed up or slow down the reading for dramatic effect. You can increase the mounting tension of an exciting scene by

shortening the sentences as you move forward and increasing the use of words with plosive sounds made by the letters *b, p, k, g, t* and *d*. In a scene that needs to slow down, particularly after an intense one, use increasingly longer sentences and softer, more sibilant sounds made by *s, sh, ch, z* and *zh*.

Pace your story well and maybe someday you'll hear your book performed in a library near you.

Linda Arms White is the author of fiction and nonfiction for children and adults. Her picture books include *Too Many Pumpkins*, *Comes a Wind*, and most recently *Too Many Turkeys*. Her *I Could Do That: Esther Morris Gets Women the Vote* won the prestigious Christopher Award for material that "affirms the highest values of the human spirit." Her nonfiction books include *Cooking on a Stick: Campfire Recipes for Kids*, *The Pocket Guide to Camping*, and *Log Spirit*—a design book for log homes.

**GROWING AS A
PICTURE BOOK
WRITER**



Creating Timeless Stories for Young Readers

One of the most rewarding aspects of writing for children is that, if you get it right, your book can stay in print for generations. Not every book achieves this status, of course, nor does it have to. Topical nonfiction will go out of date as the world changes, but it's of great value today. Stories that rely on current events to propel the plots are relevant now but will seem passé in 10 years. But the books with true staying power are those that embody timeless, universal truths of childhood. Books for young children are the most unwavering in their portrayal of the core childhood experiences. Here are a few classics that would easily get published if they were written today:

Bam Bam Bam by Eve Merriam, illustrated by Dan Yaccarino (ages 3-6, Henry Holt, published 1995. Text originally written in 1966). Eve Merriam's spare poem about a construction site plugs directly into children's unwavering fascination with buildings coming down and going back up again. Built-in sound effects (*CRASH goes a chimney, POW goes a hall, ZOWIE goes a doorway, ZAM goes a wall.*) make hearing the story out loud a viscerally satisfying experience. Yaccarino's updated illustrations use shape, color and perspective to focus on the bricks, machinery and muscles of the construction workers. The whole book is big, bold and loud. What's not to love?

Officer Buckle and Gloria by Peggy Rathmann (ages 4-8, Putnam, published 1995). Rathmann is a master of the wordless—or nearly-wordless—picture book (illustrators, check out *Goodnight Gorilla* and *10 Minutes Till Bedtime!*). In this classic, which won the Caldecott Medal in 1996, Rathmann's deadpan text infuses the illustrations with ironic humor. Officer Buckle loves sharing his safety tips with children at Napville School, but his lectures put his audience to sleep. Then one day he brings his police dog Gloria. Unbeknownst to Officer Buckle, Gloria acts out the safety tips behind him on stage (*"NEVER leave a THUMB TACK where you*

might SIT on it!"), and the audience is suddenly paying attention. When a news station films one of Officer Buckle's popular lectures, he sees himself on TV and is so embarrassed he refuses to make another appearance. So Gloria goes alone, but without her partner the lecture flops. After Napville School has its biggest accident ever, Officer Buckle learns the best safety tip of all: *"Always stick with your buddy!"*

Even if Rathmann hadn't provided the delightful illustrations, the story itself is so appealing that another talented illustrator could have depicted Gloria's antics. Though an adult, Officer Buckle experiences childlike emotions: he wants to be liked, he doesn't want to be laughed at, he dumps a friend when he feels betrayed. In the end, forgiveness, friendship and teamwork win out—a very satisfying conclusion to any picture book.

A Picture for Harold's Room by Crockett Johnson (ages 4-8, HarperCollins I Can Read Book, published 1960). Harold returns for another purple crayon adventure in this easy reader story. Harold decides he wants a picture for his room, so of course he draws one. The picture evolves into a town surrounded by a forest. When Harold steps into the picture to draw the moon, he realizes he's a giant. To avoid scaring the town's residents, Harold draws his way over mountains, past clouds and through the sea, all the while noting how much bigger he is than the things he's drawing (he has to duck to avoid an airplane he creates). When Harold draws a train track coming toward him, the perspective forces him to make the track bigger and bigger. Soon Harold is dwarfed by the objects in his picture and feels small. His problem now is how to get home (he can't wade through the ocean or climb the mountains). Then it occurs to him: *"This is only a picture!"* He crosses it out, draws the door to his room, and returns home his normal size.

The beauty of this book is it can be understood by a three-year-old, or read independently by a first grader. Harold gets to do what all kids secretly want—to invent his own world by drawing on the walls. He's completely in control of what

he creates, but the subtle lesson is that even your imagination can sometimes grow larger than what you can handle. But Harold's ultimately in charge and can find his way home any time he wants. The simple single-color illustrations on white backgrounds can be easily copied by young readers, and echo the timeless yearning of children to be masters of their worlds. Any child can do what Harold does (at least on paper), and the introductory art lesson is a bonus.

Other classics to study:

The Snowy Day by Ezra Jack Keats (ages 3-7, Puffin, published 1962, won Caldecott Medal in 1963). The quintessential portrayal of how it feels to be a kid on the day after a snowstorm.

Chicka Chicka Boom Boom by Bill Martin, Jr. and John Archambault, illustrated by Lois Ehlert (ages 2-6, Simon & Schuster, published 1989). Here's how to write an original concept book, and it's also a good lesson on creating catchy verse.

Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak (ages 4-8, HarperCollins, published 1963, won Caldecott Medal in 1964). The granddaddy of all classic picture books, this story acknowledges how scary it can be for a child to argue with his mother, and yet allows the reader to own and ultimately get control over powerful emotions.

The Mixed-Up Chameleon by Eric Carle (ages 3-7, HarperCollins, published 1975). Part concept book (colors, animal identification) part plot, this book sets the standard for stories with the theme, "You're special just the way you are."

The Golly Sisters Go West by Betsy Byars, illustrated by Sue Truesdell (published 1985), and *Days with Frog and Toad* by Arnold Lobel (published 1979). Both Harper I Can Read Books. These two easy readers contain short stories centered around friendship. Both feature two adults (or animals who represent adult characters), one childlike, one slightly more grown-up. The lessons are subtle and never preachy; the books resonate with affection between the characters. My seven-year-old still laughs out loud when reading these favorites.

Add Rhythm to Your Prose

Good writing speaks to the reader in an almost audible way. We can hear the words in our heads; they have a cadence, an inflection, a rhythm. The particular pattern of words on paper adds meaning and emotion to the sentences. This is why strong, unique writing is said to have a voice.

It's obvious that poetry has either a systematic meter or a looser rhythm, but prose can have a rhythmic structure as well. With board books and picture books—those stories meant to be read out loud—rhythm adds to both the reading and listening experience. This rhythm can be developed several ways. One is by allowing the text to assume a conversational tone. In natural speech, we don't talk in complete, grammatically correct sentences. In *My Big Dog*, a picture book by Janet Stevens and Susan Stevens Crummel, an informal first-person narration establishes the pattern of Merl's speech and shows that he thinks he's a very special cat:

*Inside my house, my PUR-R-R-R-fect house,
everything is MINE!*

My dish

My sofa

My chair

My mouse

My bed

*The people in my house are cat
people. They love to pet me. Which I let
them do. Sometimes, when I feel like it.*

Interspersing short sentences, or lists, between longer sentences slows down the reading and gives the child time to look at the pictures before

turning the page. Another rhythmic device is repeating the same word several times, giving the sentence a strong beat. In *The Biggest, Best Snowman* by Margery Cuyler, illustrated by Will Hillenbrand, Little Nell "patted and matted and batted" snow into a ball, then:

*She rolled it and rolled it and rolled
it to Reindeer. Reindeer nudged it and
nudged it and nudged it to Hare.
Hare kicked it and kicked it and
kicked it to Bear Cub.*

*Bear Cub rolled it and rolled it and
rolled it until it stopped—THUD--by the
edge of a BIG icy pond.*

Every picture book will have a unique rhythm, dictated by the story and the characters who inhabit it. No matter what kind of story you're writing, pay attention to the beat of the language. Give your voice room to speak to the reader loud and clear.

Writing Picture Books: Where's the Fun? by Linda Arms White

Several years ago, my then five-year-old grandson told me about his first venture on the climbing wall. I feigned concern for his safety, though I knew he had been harnessed and tethered. "Rowan, that sounds too dangerous," I said. "I'm not sure you're big enough. What if you slip and fall, hit your head?" He thought for a second and, with a twinkle in his eye, said, "But Nana, where's the fun?" After a big laugh from everyone at the table, we decided if he were careful and took safety precautions, he could climb again. But his words echo through my head often, especially when I critique manuscripts. Many are nicely written, well crafted, with interesting characters, but they leave me wondering—where's the fun?

Now, every story doesn't have to be "fun" per se. Certainly in a story about a serious topic such as the death of a pet, fun would not be appropriate or fit the tone of the story. But every picture book story needs child appeal.

Kid readers, even when they are listeners, like the same things the rest of us do:

- An entertaining, age-appropriate story
- Unique characters to care about and root for
- The tension and suspense of wondering if the character will be able to solve his problem
- A surprise ending

Still, a picture book story can have all those things and fail to catch the attention of the child. And once their attention is lost, reading time is over.

So, how do you appeal to the child? Grab their attention with:

- **Interesting vocabulary** – chamomile, smithereens, and Constantinople are just plain fun to hear and more fun to say.
- **Repetitive words or phrases** – the child can anticipate where these

repetitions happen and chime in at the appropriate time. Until..., until..., until...

- **Rhythm and rhyme** – these are great treats to the ear, but only when they are exceedingly well done and suit the flavor of the story. Goodnight room. Goodnight moon. Goodnight cow jumping over the moon.

- **Forms of word play** – like alliteration, onomatopoeia where words imitate sounds, hyperbole (exaggeration), metaphor, and similes can be great fun. Who doesn't love such phrases as the itsy bitsy spider?

- **Great illustrations** – Of course, the writer has little control over the art work but the tone of the writing, the rollicking, serious, humorous, quirky, bigger than life words you use will certainly influence the choice of illustrator as well as his or her illustrations.

When I worked with editor Melanie Kroupa on my picture book *Comes a Wind*, she said she loved the story. It had such heart. But it needed more...."More whimsy? Just push the language," she said. It was simple, good advice. Now, when I write the first drafts of a story, I concentrate most on the story and the characters and getting logically from the beginning to the end without missing any beats. When all that is in place, I'm free to go back and "push it." It's what I call "sprinkling the magic dust." That last draft, that last day is the most fun of all the writing days. That's the day my story goes from really good to child-worthy.

Picture books take children on adventures they may never otherwise experience. They introduce them to thoughts and ideas they might never hear from those close to them and whisk them away to places they may never see. The language, especially the verbs, needs to be rich, deep and lyrical enough to support all that awe and wonderment. And every picture book story needs a happy ending to assure the child that everything is right in the world. It may be the only time of the day that things really are right for that child.

You may love your characters. You may feel your story is important and carries an meaningful message for young readers. You may have been careful to show and not tell. And you may have scrubbed out every unnecessary word. But

before you send it off, ask yourself if it has the child appeal the editor is looking for. You don't ever want an editor to ask..."But, where's the fun?"

Linda Arms White is the author of fiction and nonfiction for children and adults. Her picture books include *Too Many Pumpkins*, *Comes a Wind*, and most recently *Too Many Turkeys*. Her *I Could Do That: Esther Morris Gets Women the Vote* won the prestigious Christopher Award for material that "affirms the highest values of the human spirit." Her nonfiction books include *Cooking on a Stick: Campfire Recipes for Kids*, *The Pocket Guide to Camping*, and *Log Spirit*—a design book for log homes.

A Look at Picture Book Trends

Monitoring trends is tricky. Writing directly to a current trend (penguins, for instance) can stifle your creativity and date your book before it even hits the stores. But it's important to understand the broad story elements that appeal to your audience. So let's take a look at the timeless qualities of perennial picture book bestsellers:

Characters with spirit: Joining the ranks of Olivia (featured in picture books by Ian Falconer) and chapter book classics such as Kay Thompson's Eloise and Beverly Cleary's Ramona is *Fancy Nancy* by Jane O'Connor, illustrated by Robin Preiss Glasser. Nancy, a diva-in-training, loves everything lacy and frilly, and is determined to fancy up her family for a night out. A messy mishap threatens to put a damper on the evening, but her supportive family helps smooth everything out. Nancy's sheer joy at being fabulous celebrates young children's ability to march to their own beat, before they grow up and start worrying about peer pressure. Characters who embrace life are an appealing way to say "be yourself" without preaching, and often inspire multiple titles. What I'd like to see: more picture books featuring boys with pluck, and not just the mischievous, naughty-but-charming kind.

Plots that are silly and fun, with a touch of reality: Kids' lives are full of rules and restrictions, so they appreciate being able to escape through books. *Pirates Don't Change Diapers* by Melinda Long, illustrated by David Shannon, was a welcome follow-up to the popular *How I Became a Pirate*. Jeremy Jacob is reunited with Captain Braid Beard and his nutty crew who want to dig up the treasure they buried in his backyard at the end of the previous book. But Jeremy insists they help him placate his cranky baby sister, with hilarious results. Kids will love to join in on the pirate-speak ("Aargh!"), and older siblings will laugh at this

goofy rendition of buccaneers turned babysitters. The trick with humor is seeing the world from a child's perspective, which often means making fun of the grown-ups. On a related note, seeing problems, and their solutions, through a child's eyes will connect with your audience much more effectively than imparting adult wisdom from on high. Mo Willems never talks down to his readers, and his understanding of the little crises that can consume a child is refreshing. Take a look at *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale*.

Let the reader participate: When writing for the younger end of the picture book audience, think of a group of squirmy preschoolers listening to a story. What holds their attention? Giving them a way to participate in the story. *Not a Box* by Antionette Portis features simple, bold line art and minimal text. "Why are you sitting in a box?" reads the opening page, opposite an image of a small rabbit, who appears next to a square. "It's not a box," reads the next page, as the box is transformed into a race car. The questions and answers continue, showing all the things the rabbit can make with the box. By letting children guess what might come next, or providing a box along with the book, young kids can actually act out what's being read.

Mo Willems proved his ability to think like a four-year-old with *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!*, in which a bus driver steps out at the beginning of the story, and charges the reader with keeping the pigeon away from the wheel. The pigeon tries all sorts of preschooler tactics to get his way (bargaining, whining, a full-blown temper tantrum), placing children in the adult role of saying "No." It's a delightful role reversal and gives kids a chance to laugh at their own manipulative efforts. Both of the above books feature spare artwork, a simple concept, and leave lots of room for the child's imagination to fill in the details. It's a proven way to get young children hooked on books.

Sentimental Stories: There is a type of picture book that is based on a single incident or an emotion, rather than a character and a plot. It might revolve around memories of a grandparent, spending the day at the seashore, or a bedtime

routine. While these books tend to hone in on the experience of adults more than children (as *Someday* by Alison McGhee, illustrated by Peter Reynolds, about a mother's hopes and dreams for her child), a few manage to have some kid-appeal. *On the Night You Were Born* by Nancy Tillman explores how the birth of a baby causes celebration throughout the world without becoming overly sappy. No matter what type of book you write, always remember your audience is the child.

8 Things Picture Book Editors Don't Want to See by Penny L. Ehrenkranz

In my capacity as an acquisitions editor, I've read a number of picture book manuscripts that never should have left home. There are numerous articles telling writers how to write a picture book, but here are eight types of stories publishers don't want to see.

Rhyming stories. You've all seen them, so you know publishers will publish a story in rhyme. As a beginning writer, you should bear in mind that most editors cringe when they see a rhyming story in their slush pile. Why? Because so many of them are badly written.

Putting together a string of rhyming words doesn't make a story. Writers who try to do this put more time into finding words that rhyme than actually crafting a story that has the main elements of a good tale—a beginning, a middle, and an end, as well as problems for the main character to solve.

Imagine an editor's chagrin if this came across her desk:

*Cute little Lizzy
ran around in a tizzy.
She ran in huge circles,
hoping for miracles,
before she fell in a heap
smelling like dirty feet.*

Yes, this rhymes, but it isn't a story. Unfortunately for the beginning writer, it's difficult to craft a rhyming picture book an editor will want to publish. You must be very gifted at telling a story in rhyme to be successful. New writers will add unnecessary words just to keep the rhyme going in their story. They may add characters and events, too, which don't contribute to the story, other than making a good rhyme. It isn't just about the rhyme—it's about a well-crafted story.

Too often writers believe the best way to gain publication is to emulate another writer. Many times that writer is the beloved Dr. Seuss. He was a master in his field, but it's been said he wrote over a 1,000 pages for every 64 pages he published.

Consider Dr. Seuss' *Green Eggs and Ham*. The main character (MC) is approached by Sam and asked to eat green eggs and ham. The MC refuses, but Sam continues to pester him and offer him any number of ways to try green eggs and ham. Finally, the MC agrees only to find he likes green eggs and ham. This is a delightful story children love. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The MC has to overcome his disgust at eating green eggs and ham, and he does so by the end of the story.

Remember, to create a rhyming book editors will love, you need a good story that happens to rhyme. You need a main character (preferably a child or animal), who has a problem that he needs to solve. Along the way, the child has obstacles that he must overcome. Finally, he solves his problem by himself without the aid of an adult.

Stories of inanimate objects. While you may think a story about a shoe that has traveled a thousand miles makes a fun read, children cannot relate to an animated shoe. Sure, the shoe may need to find its way from New York to Los Angeles and may encounter all kinds of disasters along the way, but please don't submit it to a publishing house. Keep your main characters confined to children, birds, and animals.

There are a few successful stories that have machine-driven characters. Remember the classic *The Little Engine That Could* and more recently the *Thomas the Tank Engine* stories. If your story can only work by using a character other than a child or an animal, try using a machine-driven object, such as a lawnmower. Don't write a story about a rake trying to figure out how to get all the leaves in the yard piled up so the neighbor kids could jump into them. Kids won't be interested, and an editor won't buy it.

There are also books, such as *Pinocchio*, *The Velveteen Rabbit* and *Toy Story*,

where the main character is a toy. The reason toys work as main characters is they have bodies and faces like real people and animals. Children already relate to their toys, often as imaginary friends. It's easy, then, for them to imagine the toy in the story can become real.

Slice-of-life stories. Slice-of-life stories are probably the ones that most often cross an editor's desk. These are cute little vignettes that often have the potential to become a full-fledged story, however, they have no conflict. For example, Janie wakes up one morning and decides to go for a walk. On her walk, she finds a flower, and a stone, and a playground. At the playground, she stops to swing on the swing and play on the slide. When she gets hungry, she goes home to eat lunch. This is not a story. Janie has no problems in her life. She has no obstacles to overcome. Imagine instead that Janie has a fear of spiders. On her walk, she encounters a spider in a web right in the path. She has to figure out a way to go past the spider. On one side of the path there is a barking German Shepherd. On the other side of the path, there is a steep slope and a pond. Now, Janie has a problem; she has obstacles to overcome. The story is no longer just a slice of Janie's life.

Stories with dream endings. Imagine you and your child are reading along, both of you are fascinated with the story and can't imagine how the main character will get out of his predicament, when you come to the fatal words, "and he woke up." Just as you would be disappointed with this conclusion, so, too, will an editor be disappointed looking at the manuscript. This is not an ending an editor wants to see. Your character needs to solve his or her problems. Waking up from a dream is not a solution. Give your characters real problems and real resolutions.

Stories with morals. Aesop certainly got away with telling moral tales, but today's modern writer won't. Neither children nor editors want to read a tale loaded with moral platitudes. If you feel you have a mission to teach morals to

children, volunteer at your church, don't make those teachings the focus of your picture book. It won't get published, unless you, as the author, decide to self-publish.

In today's market, it is possible to embed a moral into the plot of your story, as long as you're not preaching to the reader. An example of this is *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*, by Kevin Henkes. In this story, Lilly loves school her teacher. One day, Lilly brings a pair of sunglasses, three quarters and a plastic purse that plays music to school. Lilly's teacher asks her to put away her purse, but she loves it so much. To her horror, Mr. Slinger confiscates her purse until the end of the day. Later that day, Lilly is so angry she draws a terrible picture of Mr. Slinger. When it's time to leave school, Mr. Slinger gives Lilly back her precious purse. When she opens the bag and sees all of her things, plus a note from Mr. Slinger and a bag of treats, she's so upset, she runs home and tells her parents. That night, on her own, she draws a new picture of Mr. Slinger and writes an apology that Mr. Slinger accepts.

While Mr. Henkes doesn't preach to his readers, he cleverly tells his story in a way children will understand the significance of jumping to conclusions. Everything is not always what it seems and tomorrow will be a better day. Only if you can weave a moral into your plot should you consider doing this.

Stories that haven't been proofread. It is amazing how many writers will slop together a group of words, leave the proofreading to the spell checker, and send off the manuscript hoping to be published. While writing a picture book may seem like an easy task, most picture book writers will take over a year to craft a 32-page book. One of the manuscripts I received contained numerous spelling errors. Yes, the words were correctly spelled, but they were the wrong word, such as "her" for "here" and "there" for "their." Other errors included sentences that should have ended with a question mark but ended with a period instead. I have also seen dialogue with unclosed quotation marks. Editors have hundreds of manuscripts from which to chose the ones they will publish. A sloppy manuscript will not get past the first reader.

Stories with lots of description. A picture book is just that—a book reliant upon pictures. The reader knows what’s happening in the book from the visual on the page. A picture book isn’t a novel or a 1,500 word short story. The editor doesn’t want to know what your character looks like or what color shorts she’s wearing. He doesn’t need to know what race your character is. Neither does she need a description of the house or the yard where your character lives and plays. If you have to write those descriptors in your first drafts, go ahead, but before you send off the story to a publisher, remove all references to how someone or something looks.

Long, drawn-out stories. Remember the standard for picture books is only 32 pages. On those 32 pages, there needs to be room for pictures. Keep your story to a short time-frame and write with a strong active voice. Eliminate adjectives and filler words. This isn’t an essay you’re padding for your English class. This is a compact story with the fewer words written, the better the chance of acceptance.

Now that you know what an editor doesn’t want to see, explore what is already written. Spend time at the library and in children’s book stores. Read published picture books. Learn from others, and then write your own unique story.

Penny Lockwood Ehrenkranz has worked as an editor and published more than 100 articles, 75 stories, three ebooks, a chapbook, a picture book, and her stories have been included in two anthologies. She writes for both adults and children. Visit her web site at <http://pennylockwoodehrenkranz.yolasite.com>, blog <http://pennylockwoodehrenkranz.blogspot.com>, and her books:

Boo's Bad Day: <http://www.4rvpublishingcatalog.com/penny-lockwood.php>

Love Delivery: <http://tinyurl.com/4ajo9wz> and <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B005GPRQEC>

Lady in Waiting: <http://tinyurl.com/6u4keh5>

Mirror, Mirror: <https://museituppublishing.com/bookstore2>

A Past and A Future: <http://www.genremall.com/anthologiesr.htm#pastfuture>
Dragon Sight: <http://www.genremall.com/fictionr.htm#dragonsight>

Should You Illustrate Your Own Book?

Let's say you've written a picture book and you'd like to try your hand at the illustrations. You've dabbled in art for years—everyone says you're good. You know exactly how the pictures should look for your story. Why not just submit some illustrations with the manuscript?

You may have already heard that this isn't necessarily a good idea. Why? Editors list several reasons: the illustrations need to add another dimension to the story that goes beyond the words, and inexperienced artists may not have the complex vision to pull this off; the style of illustrations must complement the tone and subject of the story; the quality of art in children's books today is very high. I'd known these reasons, and agreed with them, for years, but I didn't really get it until I was teaching a workshop in Albuquerque and was fortunate to have as a guest speaker Linnea Hendrickson, a librarian and children's literature instructor at the University of New Mexico. Linnea had been a member of the Caldecott Medal selection committee in 1998, the year Paul O. Zelinsky's *Rapunzel* won the highest honor publishing awards for children's book illustration. Linnea's slide show on the history of the Caldecott revealed that illustrating a picture book demands so much more than being able to draw a nice picture.

What comprises award-winning illustrations? First, the look of the pictures must perfectly match the text. To judge for yourself, get a list of the Caldecott winners from your library and study the books from the last 20 or 30 years. The first thing you'll notice is the diversity of styles and range of mediums used. Oil paintings, scratch boards, watercolors, pen and ink, cut paper collage and wood block prints were only a few of the techniques employed in the artwork. But each artist's style also provided a masterful counterpart to the story, so the words and pictures worked together to form a seamless, unified vision. If you are first and foremost an author, you need to ask yourself if your illustration style enhances your particular story, or takes away from it. What

struck me most about Linnea's presentation was the sheer technical expertise of the winning illustrators. Elements of layout and design were subtly incorporated into the pictures to affect the reader on a subconscious, emotional level.

Speaking of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, one of her "touchstone" books, Linnea pointed out how the boy Max is running from the right side of the picture toward the left in the second illustration. This is in the opposite direction of how our eye is used to seeing the action unfold, and sets up a sense of unease for the reader. As Max's imaginary journey begins, the pictures get bigger, eventually spilling over the "gutter" in the middle of the book and finally encompassing three two-page spreads in the center of the story. When Max starts his trip back home, the pictures gradually get smaller again, until the final page is just text. The Wild Things themselves are a juxtaposition of conflicting emotions. Their rounded bodies and faces with huge grins mean Max isn't afraid of them, yet they also possess sharp teeth and claws. They're a part of Max, but something he needs to tame before he can return home.

Linnea commented that, when she was looking at the artwork through her camera to take the slides for her presentation, many of the pictures seemed to glow. And though some of the winning books didn't appeal to me personally, I could see what she meant. Somehow the colors and composition of the pictures leapt off the page and pulled the reader right into the book. It occurred to me that children could get an education in art appreciation just from looking at fine picture books.

Many authors do have the talent and training to be able to create exceptional artwork for their own texts. But if you have any doubts, my advice is to leave the illustrations to someone else. The illustrator bears a tremendous amount of responsibility toward the success of a picture book. Yes, the words provide the story, without which the pictures wouldn't exist. But the first thing someone sees when they pick up a book is the pictures. The art draws the reader into the story, the cover prompts a potential buyer to open the book.

When the illustrations don't live up to the text, the entire book falls flat. But when the art shines, it's magic.

Is It a Picture Book, or a Magazine Story?

Picture book texts are short, but not all short stories are picture books. Some are more suited to magazines. Let's suppose you've written a 900-word story about a boy who moves to a new house in a different state. How would you know which market is best for your work? Here are some ways to tell the difference:

What's the age of your main character? If your boy (let's call him Zach) is eight or under, it could be a picture book story. If he's over eight years old, it's probably better suited for a magazine. This isn't a hard and fast rule, but in general kids in the middle grades have middle grade problems, which are more applicable to a magazine that caters to an older audience. However, if you have an adult main character with a kid-like problem, it could be a picture book. So age is only one of the criteria for determining the market for your story.

Does the story require many illustrations? Picture book stories are told in a series of active scenes, each of which requires a different illustration to bring it to life. Magazine stories may be accompanied by only one or two pictures, so the action is completely conveyed through the words. This means fewer scenes, a shorter time span, and more description than in a picture book.

Does more of the story happen inside the character's head? Picture book stories are very concrete and visually-oriented, so the plot is revealed to the reader through the actions of the main character. Each plot point—what happens to the character (his problem or conflict), and how he deals with it—must be seen. With a magazine story, the plot can be more internal. The character might think through a problem, write it out, dream about it, and then solve it. Not every element has to be demonstrated visually to the reader. Be aware, though, if you're writing a magazine story for very young children (five years old or less),

you don't want to rely completely on thoughts and dialogue because the plot will be too abstract.

So let's look at how our story might be written for each market: Six-year-old Zach explores his strange new house and finds things that make him feel at home (picture book); six-year-old Zach sets up his new room, making it his (magazine); nine-year-old Zach writes his first email from his new home to the best friend he left behind (magazine); nine-year-old Zach meets the kid next door, and after a rocky start they become friends (probably too complicated for a short magazine story—could be a chapter book). Five-year-old Zach starts his new school, adjusts to the unfamiliar routine, and overcomes his shyness at making new friends (picture book); five-year-old Zach walks to school on the first day with Mom and talks about his fears, then is comforted when he meets another new boy on the playground (magazine).

The best way to tell the difference between a picture book and a magazine story is to read several examples of both. Don't try to force a magazine story into the picture book format—you'll just collect a pile of frustrating rejection letters. Find the right fit for your story, and you'll have the best chance for making a sale.

An Interview with Janet Lawler on How to Write in Rhyme

A while back I had the pleasure of speaking with Janet Lawler who writes wonderful rhyming picture books. Her book *Tyrannoclaus*, illustrated by John Shroades and published by HarperCollins, had just come out. (You can find out more about this book and all of Janet's book on her website www.JanetLawler.com) Here's the transcript of the interview, in which Janet gives some of her best tips on writing in rhyme.

LAURA: Editors often tell writers that they don't want to see rhyming stories. And what they really mean—at least in *my* opinion—is that they don't want to see *bad* rhyming stories. Why do you think it's so easy for a writer to write a *bad* rhyme.

JANET: I think writers can write bad rhymes for really more than one reason, but the primary one is oftentimes, they're focusing on the words that are at the very end of a sentence that make the rhyme. They totally get lost in creating sentences where the ends of the sentences match. They forget two main things. Number one, you need a really good story first no matter whether you're writing in rhyme or prose. And secondly, when you're writing in rhyme, it's really a lot more than the end of the sentence that needs to work. You need to have a story that has been thought out. You should be maybe writing it in some kind of a rough outline and developing beginning, middle and end unless you're dealing with really a concept. My very first book was *Kisses with Colors*. It's really a mother's love poem. It has a theme and it's more of a concept book than an actual story. Rhyme is suited to some of those kinds of books for the very young. But you really do want to be telling a story and if you're writing a full-length picture book, focusing on having tension, resolution or beginning, middle and ending.

LAURA: Now, you talked about concept books. What other kinds of stories are best suited for rhyme? Can it be any kind of picture book story or are there certain types of stories that you find lend themselves better to this format?

JANET: Well, if you focus on the concepts, you can have novelty books or concept books. *Too Many Bunnies* by Rick Walton is a delightful combination of alphabet and counting. You can also have just-for-fun stories. I think rhyme is particular suited for tickling funny bones of all ages, both with an over-the-top plot, as well as fun sounds, rhythms and rhymes. Older kids can laugh. Younger kids may have a different sensibility, but they'll get caught up in the fun and particularly when you have terrific illustrations to match. I think the fantasy and silliness of picture books is really a terrific blend.

Nonfiction also can be written in rhyme. You also can have books that teach some complicated nonfiction with partial prose matter to support the rhyme. I think you need to think about serious topics really not being suited for rhymes. If you're writing about the loss of a pet or some serious emotion, it's better to craft a story in prose.

I tend to think in rhyme initially and when I visited the Grand Canyon about ten years ago, afterwards, I wrote a poem about it in rhyme. I actually was moved to tears by the Grand Canyon itself. It was just such an incredible experience, to stand at the edge there. But I never did anything with that poem because I really felt like I was minimizing the grandeur of that incredible place by putting it in rhyme. So, it doesn't always work.

LAURA: And is it important to match the style or the meter of the rhyme with the story that you're telling? For example, like books that are geared for the really young kids, they might have a real short rhyming pattern, maybe something that's repetitive a lot, whereas stories for older kids that rhyme, the rhyming pattern might be a little bit longer or looser?

JANET: Yes! I think for the very young, a simple pattern is often the best. You see young children are using these kinds of stories not only for a joyful shared moment probably with an adult they're close to, but they're also learning

—it’s early literacy; the sounds of the words are helping to develop their vocabulary. So, simple and predictable is okay with the very young. I try to do that with the rhymes and patterns that I develop for early books. As you get older, unpredictability and more complicated patterns are fun, too. You can stick in a refrain that doesn’t rhyme in the middle of a series of rhyming couplets and have some fun that way. You can pretty much create whatever you want.

I think the secret for all of this is to continually be reading it out loud; to read it out loud to yourself and others read it out loud so that you can hear it read by somebody who didn’t know how you wanted those words come out, see if you’ve created any problems.

LAURA: I’ve read rhyming manuscripts in my critique service that are really more for adults than kids. And when you were talking about this Grand Canyon poem that you wrote, maybe in a lot of ways, that was part of the problem. It was more of an adult sensibility than a child’s.

JANET: You know what? You’re absolutely right! And I think that you need to be mindful of the audience and what you’re trying to do. Not to say that you don’t want to have something there for the adults—especially with the humorous rhyming books—because I think you can have humor that appeals to children of all ages. I think *Sailor Moo: Cow at Sea* by Lisa Wheeler is a perfect example of that. It is just too funny from so many perspectives. Kids love it and so do adults!

LAURA: Are there other ways to test your rhymes or your subjects to make sure that they’re not too adult to you. For example, I find if someone’s getting really abstract or they’re talking more about feelings than about concrete things that can be illustrated, for me, that’s a red flag. Do you have any tests like that you run your own work through?

JANET: I do! I pretty much try writing it out, the ideas or images that come to me. And sometimes, they do come. As to adults, I have, for example, a couple of lines from an early version of *A Mother’s Song*. One of the couplets I had was ‘*Watch the wind blowing our hair to and fro, changing its mind about which way*

to go and I love (obviously, I wrote the words, so I love them)—I love the idea of the wind blowing the hair back and forth. I could see the illustrations. And I could see a kid understanding the idea *'the wind is changing its mind'*, but the phrase *'to and fro'* is adult language.

Sometimes, I realize this myself. Sometimes, I go to my weekly writers' group where there are ten of us and we all write for children, all different genres. And someone will say, "I think that *'to and fro'* is too adult," which is actually what happened with this particular couplet. And I ultimately abandoned that even though the idea of the wind going back and forth was something fresh that kids might enjoy.

Sometimes, you fall in love with half of your couplet. One line, you really like, but you can't switch it around and make a line work that isn't too adult or doesn't have some other problem. You *should* end up abandoning it. Otherwise, you're really trying to push words to have an end rhyme and you are going to have a problem.

LAURA: This gets into the whole editing process. Once you sell your rhyming story, you have to get edited just like any other book. How does that work when you've written in rhyme where every word, every phrase has been so carefully chosen?

JANET: Sometimes I've handled it better than others to be perfectly honest. And I think what authors need to remember when they go into the process, whether it's prose or rhyme, you always need to take a deep breath when you get editorial requests. I feel like my breath, sometimes, needs to be deeper because the struggle of a rhyme to make it work just isn't quickly replaceable with something else. Oftentimes, there's a domino effect in terms of the whole story and the lines are really created piece by piece.

The thing, I think, authors need to think about is what kind of approach their editor is taking. Every editor has a different approach. I've experienced editorial revision where the editor had said, "I'd like this to be changed for this reason. Leave it to me to figure out how to go about doing that and presenting some

alternatives.” Any good author should be happy to do that. It’s more difficult if you have an editorial experience where somebody rewrites your work. And I think that’s true whether you write in prose or rhyme, but as I’ve said, I think it has some added issues if you write in rhyme because you may have an editor who really isn’t as frequently writing and rhyming as you are and may be inadvertently messing with the meter and causing problems. You obviously need to figure out a diplomatic way to handle those kinds of situations.

What I would advise you to do when an editor has written revisions for you and you really don’t like them, is to first of all try to objectively judge if the changes work (because ultimately, you may end up with them in your manuscript if you don’t make some other hard choices about taking the whole story back and not many of us are going to do that). If not, then I suggest you try to think of an alternative revision that will be in your words. And as long as the editor doesn’t have his/her ego invested in what they’ve suggested, you can take care of it that way.

LAURA: I think that’s great advice. And I think that you can use that approach in any kind of editing situation. Even if it’s in prose, it’s coming up with an alternative and being able to say, “You know, I think this works better because...” rather than just getting defensive. A good editor will really be working towards the best manuscript possible, not what the editor wants to see in your manuscript.

JANET: I think you need to just not panic. *Tyrannoclaus* I wrote originally in the present tense. Near the end of the process, my editor requested that I change it to the past tense. And that did cause me panic because there was about a third of my couplets that no longer worked because, for example, ‘fall’ rhymes with ‘wall’, but ‘wall’ doesn’t rhyme with ‘fell’, which is the past tense of ‘fall’.

But you can do it. You just have to take your time and every time I’ve done revisions, I found that the ultimate result is a more satisfying manuscript. Editors know what they’re doing. And you need to take the ego out a little bit. The other thing that is unique for rhyming authors is you need to monitor the copyediting

process. And that is the process—once you’ve gone through the whole editorial process with your editor and you basically say, “Yep, this is the final manuscript,” and you both agree and are happy, it goes to another person who is basically going to check for commas, periods, dashes, as well as grammatical accuracy. If copyediting is done to a rhyming manuscript, it can change your lines and alter your meter.

I’ve had that happen to me. I had a pop-up book called *A Mama Bug’s Love* published by Little Simon about how mother bugs might show their love. So, it’s a little fantasy pop-up book. And I had two lines that read, “*Mama flea announces loud, ‘Come, children. Time to go. I’ve got a special treat today. Let’s do a doggy show.’*”

What happened is I never saw the copyediting. Those two lines were revised as, “*Mama Flea announces loudly*” because I really should have an adverb ‘loudly’ modifying ‘announces’. So now, I have an extra beat on that line. “*Mama Flea announces loudly, ‘Come, children. Time to go.’*” I would have changed that and gotten rid of the ‘come’ to read, “*Mama Flea announces loudly, ‘Children, time to go!’*” But I never saw it again.

If you work in rhyme, what you should do near the end of your editing process is nicely request of your editor that you get to take a look at the copyedited manuscript. I suppose that applies to prose, as well. I didn’t even really know about the copyediting process to understand how it works until I’d done a couple of books. So now, I always try to take a peek at that.

LAURA: Thanks so much for your spot-on advice. I urge all aspiring picture book writers to be sure to read all of Janet Lawler's wonderful books as terrific examples of telling a story in the rhyming format.

Straight Talk About Talking Animals

When I was a kid, "talking animal stories" were everywhere. Then, when I started publishing CBI in the early 1990's, many editors decided they didn't want to see these books anymore. Of course, established authors like William Steig never stopped populating their stories with chatty mice or frogs, but beginning writers had trouble getting talking animal books past the slush pile. Now the tide has turned again, and it appears that every publisher has new picture books featuring animals with something to say. However, you can't just plop a cute bunny in your story and expect it to sell. The number one rule in children's fiction writing will always be to base your story on endearing, believable, unique characters. I've studied talking animal books and found they fall into three basic categories:

Animals Who Act Human Everyone is familiar with stories like Marc Brown's picture books about Arthur the aardvark, or Else Holmelund Minarik's **Little Bear** series of easy readers. In these books the main character lives with his or her family within a society of animals that mirrors human society. They go to school, wear clothes, play with toys and have very human problems. The main character is a child just like the reader, and has childlike thoughts, feelings and concerns. The fact that they're animals makes them visually endearing to young readers, but it's easy to forget that they're not human. Another kind of book are stories in which the characters are animals who act human, but they're not really kids. They live alone without parents. Though they're adults in the animal world, they're really kids at heart with very childlike outlooks on life. Often these books center around the friendship of two animals, such as the **Frog and Toad** easy readers by Arnold Lobel, and the **Toot & Puddle** picture books by Holly Hobbie. Part of the charm of these characters is that children can relate to creatures who are supposedly grown up.

Animals Who Act Mostly Human Another category is books in which the animals act mostly human, but retain a few elements of their true animal nature. This subtly reminds the reader that though these animals may talk, ride bikes and visit the playground, they're still animals. Often the characters are depicted in illustrations without clothes. Children are drawn to these books because they're about talking animals, an idea they find funny, delightful, and know is something adults would never accept. Paulette Bourgeois' picture books about ***Franklin*** the turtle is one example. Though Franklin functions mainly as a kid, he sleeps in his shell and doesn't have teeth (and thus feels cheated because he'll never be visited by the tooth fairy). Jonathan London's series of very early readers shows ***Froggy*** hopping and flopping around as he tries to get dressed, and being reminded by his mother that he's supposed to sleep through the winter (because that's what frogs do). In Mem Fox's ***Possum Magic***, the possums live in trees in the Australian bush and are wary of snakes, even though they dine on pumpkin scones and vegemite sandwiches. Once you start gravitating toward reality with your talking animals, you open the door for older readers. The juxtaposition of fantasy and reality can be a compelling mix if done skillfully. Brian Jacques' ***Redwall***, a young adult novel about an abbey of peaceful mice that is attacked by an army of savage rats is a prime example.

Animals Who Talk But Remain Animals The third category are animals who happen to talk, but otherwise remain true to their animal selves. Generally, if these characters interact with humans they act as any real animal would—in other words, they don't carry on conversations with people. Though the animals may (and should) face problems that children can relate to, these problems arise and are solved within the boundaries of the animal world. This scenario is perfect for middle grade readers. In E.B. White's ***Charlotte's Web***, when Wilbur the pig learns his fate is to be sold to a butcher, it's Charlotte the spider's intelligence that helps save his life. James Howe's hilarious ***Bunnicula*** is the story of a dog and cat who go to great lengths to find out whether or not the family's pet rabbit is really a vampire. In each case the authors used real animals as their models, and then

imagined what they might actually say if they could talk. Such careful groundwork results in characters who are believable and very real to the reader.

Of course, you'll always find variations on the above, but the most successful books tend to fall within these guidelines. Like any "rules" of writing, they are meant to provide a framework within which infinite stories can be told. And like all rules, it's only after you've mastered them can you begin to break them.

Informational Picture Books

Informational picture books, according to Daria Donnelly in *The New York Times Book Review* "...must strike the right balance between visual and verbal information. Each decision an artist makes about what to tell, what to show and how to do both rests on a judgment about how a grade-school-age-child--old enough to resist and spurn images as infantile--sees. Success depends upon getting a young reader to linger."

I'd like to broaden Donnelly's definition. To me, informational picture books use a storylike format to portray real events, incorporating narrative, dialogue, description and pacing into the text. Though some authors many invent characters or dialogue which forces their books to be classified as "fiction" instead of "nonfiction," all help convey facts about people who actually lived or places that exist in the real world. Informational picture books are geared to a slightly older audience than picture book stories—often kids up to age 10—and so the text and illustrations are more sophisticated and complex in order to appeal to readers who may have left picture book fiction behind.

People and places most naturally lend themselves to informational picture books. Because the average age of the reader is 6-10, authors must choose an aspect of their subject that appeals most to children in the early elementary grades. A person's entire life is too broad for the limited size of a picture book, but a few years from his or her childhood, or one accomplishment that began as a childhood passion and developed into lifelong work, is more appropriate. The events portrayed in the text must also incorporate action, changing scenes and vivid landscapes that inspire illustrations.

My New York: New Anniversary Edition by Kathy Jakobsen (Little, Brown, ages 7-12) gives the reader a child's-eye view of New York City. Becky, the consummate New York kid, goes on weekly Expeditions around the city with her family and friend Martin, introducing the reader to landmarks and lesser-known

attractions. Jakobsen's bright folk art illustrations burst with vitality and details that reveal themselves over repeated viewings. Fold-out pages help capture the scope of the city, and Becky's love of New York is infectious. This would be the perfect book to accompany a child on his first trip to the Big Apple.

The Divide by Michael Bedard, illustrated by Emily Arnold McCully (Doubleday, ages 5-8), tells the story of one year in the childhood of author Willa Cather. When she was 9, Cather's family moved west to the open prairie of Nebraska. Readers will easily relate to Cather's sadness of leaving her familiar home and her pet dog behind. We see the prairie through Cather's eyes, at first "...a flat, empty land, bare as a strip of sheet iron." But Cather warms to the prairie as spring turns into summer and she rides her pony down dirt roads lined with sunflowers. She learns of strength from old immigrant women neighbors, discovers the precious gift of a lark's song. An Afterword explains how Cather's heart would remain on the prairie forever, its harsh beauty influencing her future novels.

Though Cather's childhood experiences are the catalyst for this book, the prairie is really the focus. The effect is twofold: Bedard's lyrical, descriptive text may prompt older readers to explore Cather's books, and McCully's rich, gold-hued illustrations will make children long to travel to the bits of prairie land still left today.

Snowflake Bentley by Jacqueline Briggs Martin, illustrated by Mary Azarian (Houghton Mifflin, ages 5-9) follows the life of farmer/ naturalist Wilson Bentley and his quest to photograph snowflakes. Bentley's love of nature in general and snowflakes in particular is the driving force behind the story. Bentley's humble origins, his first snowflake photo at the age of 18, his tendency to give away his photographs, and the publication of his only book at the age of 66 all capture the life of a man who prized passion over profit. Azarian's Caldecott-winning illustrations—surprisingly detailed, homey woodcuts—perfectly match the story of a simple man who revealed the grandeur of the snowflake to the world.

Like the best informational picture books, *Snowflake Bentley* works on two levels. Younger children will enjoy the story of Bentley's life told through the primary text. Older readers can find more facts about Bentley's methods and his impact on science in the sidebars. The illustrations pull both elements together, making the book as a whole a warm tribute to a man who loved snow.

Other Informational Picture Books to Study

The Man Who Walked Between the Towers by Mordicai Gerstein (Roaring Brook, ages 5 and up), recounts aerialist Philippe Petit's tightrope walk between the towers of the World Trade Center in 1974.

The Tree of Life: A Book Depicting the Life of Charles Darwin, Naturalist, Geologist & Thinker by Peter Sis (FSG, ages 8 and up)

Dear Benjamin Banneker by Andrea Davis Pinkney, illustrated by Brian Pinkney (Harcourt, ages 6-10). The story of the correspondence between African-American Benjamin Banneker, a self-taught astronomer and mathematician, and Thomas Jefferson, on the subject of slavery.

Eleanor by Barbara Cooney (Viking, ages 5-10). The story of Eleanor Roosevelt's troubled childhood, opening with the line, "From the beginning, the baby was a disappointment to her mother."

She's Wearing a Dead Bird on Her Head! by Kathryn Lasky, illustrated by David Catrow (Hyperion, ages 6-10). How two Boston society ladies founded the Massachusetts Audubon Society.

Writing Compelling Picture Book Biographies by J.H. Everett

Creating meaningful biographical picture books for young children can be a daunting task. In short, the job of the picture book is to entertain children, to introduce them to a new subject, and to make the subject matter stick emotionally. In the picture book, emotional attachment is as important as lists of facts and details, if not more so. Ideally, entertainment and historical facts should work together to grab a kid's attention and reel them in. Remember, there is plenty of time left in a child's life to investigate a particular subject more deeply, if they become so inclined.

The Strengths of the Picture Book Format

The true strengths of the children's picture book biography (or nonfiction picture book of any kind) are the three fundamentals that move them furthest away from their adult counterparts: their inclination toward dramatic storytelling and hyperbole, their reliance on story writing elements found in myths and legends, and their use of exciting imagery to both support and expand the meaning of the text. The successful combination of the three creates an intense emotional bond between the reader and the work.

Let's look at three of the most successful picture book biographies of our time.

Model Picture Book Biographies

We'll start with a wonderful example of three-act dramatic storytelling and exciting illustration in Mordicai Gerstein's biographical work, *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers*. In it, we learn about the infamous Philippe Petit's 1974 tightrope walk between the World Trade Center Towers. The book is a tribute to Petit's spirit, as well as our own unique American spirit. Almost immediately, the plot launches out of a basic historical exposition by delving into the subversive nature of Petit's plans. Even better, we get to sneak about with

him as he prepares the stunt in the dead of night. The book's memorable rhyme increases dramatic tension and helps us rise above the boundaries of academic wording. The climax of Petit's tightrope walk, just outside of reach of the authorities, soars through the wild perspective of fold-out illustrations. Through the perspective choices of the artist, we climb out onto the rope with him. Together, poetry and art elicit a powerful emotional response. We cheer Petit. We want him to win. We relish our time on the wire with him. Arguably, these are not the goals of a typical, academically oriented biography.

Although, *So You Want To Be President?*, written by Judith St. George and illustrated by David Small is closer to a traditional, nonfiction style (lists of information accompanied by anecdotal support), its main focus is still entertainment. St. George spins presidential anecdotes on par with any American legend or folk tale. Through her tales, the American President becomes larger than life. At the same time, Small makes the office of the president more human through hilarious New Yorker-style illustrations, full of visual hyperbole. This lends the entire book the look of Mad magazine or some wild, new comic book bent on entertaining the reader on every single page. Through the coupling of their words and images, the reader feels both the larger-than-life drama of the office of the President, as well as its accessibility. In the end, we are inspired to believe that if these guys, with all of their frailties and shortcomings, could be president, then we could too!

Lastly, in *Grandfather's Journey*, Allen Say writes about his Japanese grandfather's journey to America, his expectations, life, and experiences here, as well as his return to his homeland. The illustrations convey the historical settings in a straightforward and orderly pictorial structure of a photo album, while the text concentrates on the messy and complex emotions and impressions of the people involved in difficult cross-cultural situations. Together they create a predictable format through which a child can safely explore complex social, cultural, and emotional issues. The result is a biography, whose subject matter

could have potentially scared and alienated a young reader, instead inspires and encourages the reader to ask questions and embrace their past. We can't help but be drawn into the emotional timbre of the book. We become bonded to the story and leave with a desire to explore our own family history more deeply.

Facts are Not Enough

Of course, facts, timelines, and dates are all parts of a historically and factually correct biography. However, in terms of children's biographies, they are not the most important parts of the picture book. Why? Because biographies aimed at the children's market are designed for entertainment.

A biography that is presented to a child in a typical academic format risks boring the average kid to tears. We professional writers need to work much harder than that. We have many tools at our disposal to do it right, including: the use of dramatic story structures; the use of story elements gleaned from myths and legends; and the use of exciting illustration, layout, and graphic design techniques, in which powerful images support the text for the express purpose of creating the greatest emotional impact possible.

The most important thing to remember is that when a child reads our story, fiction or nonfiction, we have been entrusted with the responsibility to light the fire of their mind and to ignite their passion for a subject, often for the very first time. We must use all of the skills and resources available to us as writers to make that story count.

J.H. Everett is a professional historian, as well as children's author and illustrator. Ottaviano Books/Henry Holt published his history book series, *Haunted Histories*, in fall 2009. He is a partner at EverWitt Productions, a creative studio that produces live, CGI, stop-motion, 2D & 3D animation for publishing, product merchandising, licensing, advertising, and film on mobile and new media platforms. <http://everwitt.com/>

Creating Picture Books for Older Readers

Nonfiction in the picture book format has traditionally been available for readers through age 12, covering everything from biographies to history to science. But fiction picture books have always limited their audience to kids up to age 8. That's changing. Third, fourth and fifth grade teachers have discovered that picture books read out loud in their classrooms engage their students in ways textbooks can't. And many middle grade kids simply like stories illustrated with beautiful artwork.

Though these picture books often have more text than their younger counterparts (up to about 1600 words), creating them is more complicated than simply writing longer stories. Here are some other qualities of older picture books:

Stories tie in with school curriculum. Authors should always consider how their books might be used in schools. Even though the books are fiction, work as many factual details into the book as possible so it can complement a teacher's lesson plan. *Finding Lincoln* by Ann Malaspina, illustrated by Colin Bootman, tells the story of an African American boy in Alabama in 1951, who had to get a book for a school report out of a whites-only library. Though the book focuses on the boy and the white librarian who helped him, it illustrates larger civil rights issues. Patricia Polacco's *Pink and Say* is based on the account of her great-great grandfather who, as a young white Union soldier, was wounded in battle and rescued by an African American soldier, then taken to his mother's home. When they were ultimately captured by Confederate troops, their fates were very different.

The writing is more complex than in younger picture books. The audience for these older picture books (generally ages 6-10 or 8-12) have been

reading on their own, and are used to seeing stories in a variety of formats. *Patrol: An American Soldier in Vietnam* by Walter Dean Myers, illustrated by Ann Grifalcon, describes a typical day in the life of a young American soldier in first-person free verse. *Almost to Freedom* by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson, illustrated by Colin Bootman (told by a young slave girl's rag doll as they escape through the Underground Railroad) incorporates the period dialect in the first-person narration: *Come sundown, we sit 'round and listen to stories about little critters foolin' big ones and about slaves outsmartin' massas. These is the best times 'cause there's lotsa laughin' and singin'.*

These older picture books tell bigger stories than those for a younger audience. The plots have a subtext, the time frame might be longer, and the endings don't necessarily wrap up happily. In that sense, they have much in common with novels.

The books can feature abstract ideas. The classic picture book audience is young enough to need abstract concepts presented in a very concrete way. This older audience is more sophisticated, and can contemplate open-ended ideas. Jon J. Muth's *The Three Questions: Based on a Story by Leo Tolstoy* uses Zen reasoning to answer the questions *When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do?* through a simple story. *Jazz* by Walter Dean Myers, illustrated by Christopher Myers, features 15 poems that show through words how different types of jazz feel when heard. Neither book is text-heavy, but they showcase ideas younger readers can't comprehend.

The books often contain back matter. Author's notes, glossaries, time lines, and recommended further reading give the books substance and reinforce the classroom connection.

If you think you're writing a picture book for older readers, spend some time reading several published examples before submitting your work to publishers. These books are shelved in the Juvenile Fiction section of the library, not with

other picture books. Don't confuse older picture book fiction with legends and folktales (also in this section). Learn what makes these books unique, and you'll have access to a brand new audience for your work.

Writing Picture Books Based on True Events by Natasha Wing

There are many stories in the news that intrigue us curious authors, and many of us have wondered if the story might make a good children's book. There are story elements and the strength of the facts to consider first before writing your nonfiction story.

A few of Mary Nethery's most recent picture books are based on true events she heard of through the news. I interviewed Mary, who was in Colorado to accept the Colorado Children's Book Award for the book she co-wrote with Kirby Larson with input from Major Brian Dennis: *Nubs: The True Story of a Mutt, Marine & a Miracle*. The story is about a marine who befriended a dog in Iraq who tracked him down to his headquarters. The marine deported the dog to California where the two now happily live. This book also won a Christopher Award in 2010.

In many of your picture books there is an animal as either the central or supporting character. What is your attraction to animal stories?

MARY: Ever since I was a small child, I've been in love with animals. I've had a cat companion since I was about six years old. And, beginning in first grade, I had a passion for drawing horses. My baby muse, Dash, came to me three years ago from a foster cat home in Atlanta, Georgia! Animals have a presence on this planet that deserves to be respected and protected. Their lives and decisions illuminate our own personal journeys. Writing *Nubs* with my sweet friend Kirby Larson gave us an opportunity to give voice to the powerful decisions Nubs made to create the life he wanted. His courage inspires us all.

What was it about this particular story that compelled you to take on this project?

I had my heart set on us finding a true animal story set in a war zone, so that we could explore the idea that love can flourish anywhere, even in the worst of circumstances. When my husband Han brought Nubs' story to our attention

(actually about two minutes after I had the original thought to look for a story like this!), everything fell into place. We have an animal whose life circumstances were dire, and yet he rose above all odds to fashion a beautiful life for himself, all through the sole act of loving a man, Marine Major Brian Dennis.

Given the facts you had, how did you figure out the arc of the story?

This story was given to us on a golden platter. The arc of the story was already there. Our job was to uncover the details so that Nubs' story could be truthfully and powerfully told.

What do you do if the true story is compelling but doesn't have a solid beginning/middle/end pattern (especially if it doesn't have a dramatic ending, or a happy one)?

That was a situation we found ourselves in when we wrote *Two Bobbies: A True Story of Hurricane Katrina, Friendship and Survival*. The exact details of what had happened to Bobbi and Bob Cat while they were on their own, following the hurricane, could never be known. They hadn't thought to bring along a camera! We struggled with this dilemma of how to approach the "middle" of the story (Act two). We resolved this issue by interviewing experts in the field (for example, rescue volunteers, animal shelter volunteers, the veterinarian who cared for Bobbi and Bob Cat after they became a part of Melinda Golis's family, and specialists with NOAA). And we also combed through our extensive interview notes to mine for additional details. Both these strategies provided us with a factually accurate portrayal of what they most likely went through while waiting to be rescued.

Did you have to embellish any of the information for the sake of the story?

No, we didn't add a thing to Nubs' story to impact its inherent drama. Neither

did we add anything to the Bobs' story. For *Two Bobbies*, we were careful to stick to the facts of the circumstances the Bobs were in, and to frame possibilities as questions. For example: "Packs of hungry, homeless dogs roamed the streets, fighting smaller animals for food. Were Bobbi and Bob Cat chased away from any scraps they might have found? With little food to eat or clean water to drink, Bobbi's ribs began to show. Bob Cat's brown-sugar markings started to fade to a dull white." This text is a combination of factual information we received via interviews, and a reasonable question to the reader.

This book contains photos. When writing the manuscript, did you trim your text knowing that a photo would tell the story for you?

When we wrote the manuscript, we hoped the photos would be used, but we had no idea if that would be the case. So photo placement was not a part of the original manuscript. However, when the layout of the book was essentially determined, we worked hard with our wonderful editor, Nancy Conescu, to trim and revise text so that the story would be a seamless telling of text and photos.

How did you go about obtaining the photos? And did your manuscript contain illustrator notes to tell the book designer which photos went with which text?

No illustrator notes to the book designer about which photos went with the text! It took the hand of the highly skilled and gifted Patti Ann Harris, Senior Art Director for Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, to create such a visually beautiful book using predominantly photos taken by the Marines on Brian's team. When Kirby and I contacted them about the possible use of their photos in the book, every Marine gave us permission to do so. There would be no book without the generosity of these men.

Do you think photos worked better for this book versus *The Two Bobbies*, which was illustrated?

We would have loved to have had photos for *Two Bobbies*. But the artist, Jean Cassels, painted the most moving and emotionally impactful illustrations one could ever ask for. Readers rave about her depictions of the Bobs! However, for Nubs' story, the power comes from the raw photos taken by the Marines. Those photos make such a dramatic and fantastic story utterly believable.

What advice would you give to writers who want to write picture books based on true events, especially with animal characters?

I'd have to say, write only what you're passionate about. *Two Bobbies* and *Nubs* were written from the pure intention of telling the pivotal moments in the lives of three animals we had fallen in love with. That intention to honestly portray their lives from their point of view (no anthropomorphism), and to let their stories speak for themselves, drove all of our decisions during the writing process.

Natasha Wing has been writing children's books for over 20 years. She is best known for her Night Before series that puts a twist on The Night Before Christmas (the most recent title is *The Night Before My Birthday*). *The Night Before Kindergarten* has sold more than 1.2 million copies. Her books have been featured on best-seller lists, state school reading lists, and notable books lists. Visit her website at www.natashawing.com



Try This Picture Book Editing Checklist

Writing picture book fiction is quite possibly the hardest type of writing there is, and yet editors receive more picture book manuscripts than any other genre. To make your work stand out from the crowd, you need to do more than study how to devise a winning plot and create believable, unique characters. You need to polish your prose until it sparkles. Here's a checklist to help with the editing process:

Check the pacing. Picture books are generally 32 pages long, which means you'll have about 28 pages of text and illustration. So break your text into 28 chunks and place each on a separate piece of paper. Staple the pages together to look like a book and read your story as you turn the pages. Notice the pacing and how the action unfolds. Does the story flow evenly, or are there several pages where nothing special happens? Does something occur on the right-hand page or each two-page spread--a rise in action, a recurring phrase, a funny moment—that makes the reader want to turn the page and see what happens next?

Note the illustration potential. Since you've made your manuscript into a "book," think about what the illustrations might look like. Are there enough changing scenes to inspire a different illustration on each page, or at least every two-page spread? Is the story told with a lot of visual elements (actions and events the reader can see)? Are there long scenes of dialogue that go on for more than one book page? (Note: Making your manuscript into a dummy book and thinking about the illustrations are for your benefit only. When you submit the manuscript to a publisher, you'd type it double-spaced without identifying where the page breaks would go. You'd also refrain from discussing any illustration ideas until the editor asks for your thoughts.)

Cut words. If you use two words to describe a character, try to find one more exact word to do the trick. Eliminate verbal clutter—words like "big," "little," "very," "almost"—that don't add any real meaning to the sentence, and instead choose strong, active nouns and verbs. Strike any sentences or scenes that don't directly advance the plot.

Use concrete images. Be sure to convey the story through concrete visual images the reader can see and the illustrator can draw. Describe abstract concepts such as feelings with sensory details the character (and the reader) can smell, hear, touch, see and taste.

Craft a satisfying ending. Does your plot have an identifiable yet surprising climax in which all the action comes together and the main character solves his or her problem? Is this climax contained within one book page? After the climax, is the story resolved (wrapped up) quickly? The resolution must feel complete and satisfying for the reader, but shouldn't be drawn out. Make it a book page or less, and your readers won't hesitate to revisit your story many times over.

How to Make a Picture Book Dummy by Natasha Wing

When I get stuck revising a picture book manuscript, the best tool I found to give me a fresh look at the story is a dummy. A mock up book, that is.

Picture books are about spare text, scene changes, a turning point, and page turners. When you physically lay out a book, you can see if your story is fulfilling these requirements. And you'll be able to cut out the excess.

To get an overview of what a dummy's structure, have a look at [this example](#).

Here's what you'll need to make a dummy:

- 8 blank sheets of 8-1/2"x11" white paper
- removable double-sided tape
- scissors
- a pencil
- a print out of your manuscript.

Stack your paper and turn the pile horizontally then folded it in half so that you have the cut edges on the right side. Number the pages. Picture books are typically 32 pages long.

Leave the first three pages for title page, publisher copyright information, and dedication, and start on page 4.

Now cut out strips of text from your manuscript and tape them onto the pages. (It'll be sloppy and the text paper will stick out, but this is just for placement.) As you start laying your text out, think about what text should be grouped together on one page or moved to the next page instead.

Could you divide the dialog between two characters on two pages? For instance:

"Look at me!" said baby monkey, swinging from a branch.

"Get down," said mother monkey.

One page could show the baby monkey swinging and the next page could show a mad mamma monkey.

Are you describing two actions that take place in two different scenes? For instance:

Lori visited the Statue of Liberty. Then she went to an art museum.

You could divide these two actions between two pages, or show a vignette on one page instead.

The page turners are most important. These are the sentences that leave the reader wondering what's next such as:

Sam looked under the table. He looked in his dresser drawer. He checked under the rug. Then he opened his closet door.

When the reader turns the page, the answer to what's behind the closet door is revealed. Page turners should be on the right side so that when a reader is done reading, he turns the page. Are your "what next?" moments on the right side? If not, move them.

I also like to put what I call "uh-oh" moments on the right page. Consider this sequence:

"You may begin," said the piano teacher.

Luanne pounded the keys. She sang at the top of her lungs. Then she stood on the bench and played the piano with her toes.

"I quit!" shouted the piano teacher.

Here's where the reader would say "uh-oh" and wonder if Luanne is going to be in trouble. She would turn the page to find out.

Once you have your pages laid out, this is a good time to check the overall

density of the text. Do some pages have way more text than others? If so, could some sentences be cut, or moved to the next page? Do you come up with extra text and no more pages to tape it on? Then your story is too long. Extra blank pages at the end and your story is too short. You may need to stretch out the text by creating dramatic double-page spreads instead of confining the climax or turning point to one page.

If your text is too short, you may also want to consider adding end notes such as a recipe, an activity, a glossary or something that would enhance the story and its topic. But don't add it just because you have space. It needs to be there for a good reason.

Another thing to do with your dummy is to check for excess words and sentences.

Let's revisit the lines above about the monkey. If you already established in an earlier page that the baby monkey had swung out on a branch, you could edit "swinging from a branch" since the illustration would show it.

Here's another good place to edit:

"I've got an idea how to make that clock work," said mouse.

"What is it?" asked parrot.

Mouse found a screwdriver. He opened the back of the clock.

Cut the second sentence since it doesn't add to the story and slows the pace down. If mouse jumps right into his solution, then you can pick up your story's pace and answer the question in the reader's head, "What is it?".

So it would be:

"I've got an idea how to make that clock work," said mouse. (This causes the reader to think, "What is it?" so he turns the page.)

Mouse found a screwdriver. He opened the back of the clock.

I hope these tips helped you look at your manuscript with an editor's and an artist's eye so that you can cut out the unnecessary words and improve clarity and pacing.

Be smart. Make a dummy.

Natasha Wing has been writing children's books for over 20 years. She is best known for her Night Before series that puts a twist on The Night Before Christmas (the most recent title is *The Night Before My Birthday*). *The Night Before Kindergarten* has sold more than 1.2 million copies. Her books have been featured on best-seller lists, state school reading lists, and notable books lists. Visit her website at www.natashawing.com

Keep Your Illustration Notes to Yourself

Picture book writers are often surprised to find out that they generally have no say in what the illustrations will look like, but there's a good reason for this practice. Picture books are really two stories, one contained in the words, the other in the pictures. It's the author's job to create the plot, characters and setting. The author gives the story a voice, whether it's funny, scary, whimsical or dramatic. But it's up to the illustrator to conceive the visual aspect of these elements and provide another level to the story. The author has to trust the editor to choose an illustrator who can do justice to her story; who can interpret her words and bring them to life.

Because most authors aren't also illustrators, they tend to think literally. If an author has a redheaded girl in mind for her main character, she may feel that the story hinges on this character's hair color. But in most cases it doesn't. Unless the character's hair plays a big role in the story, the author shouldn't waste words by describing it to the reader, nor should she describe it for the illustrator. And if the artist draws the character as a blonde, chances are he'll also portray delightful aspects of this character's personality in ways that the author never thought of.

There are a few exceptions: If the story takes place in an exotic location and the author has photographs or research materials that might help the illustrator with the setting, this can be briefly mentioned in the cover letter to the editor. Likewise, if there is an important aspect of the character that's not described in the text (a character's race, for example) the author can mention this as well. Or, if an important plot point needs to be conveyed through the illustrations only, and the illustrator cannot infer this from the text alone, it's acceptable to put a very brief note to the illustrator in the manuscript about the action in that particular illustration. Otherwise, stick to the words and chances are you'll be pleasantly surprised by the pictures.

A note for self-publishers: If you're self-publishing your picture book, and you, as the author, are hiring the illustrator, then you would have more communication during the book's production. As your book's publisher, you'd take on the role of overseeing every phase of the process (even if you hire a freelance editor, designer and illustrator). But do try to give the illustrator enough space to add his or her own spin on the pictures. You'd have final approval, but let the artist have freedom during the creative process so your book can be more than you could have imagined on your own.

Formatting Your Manuscript for Submission

Your manuscript should always be typed, double-spaced. Use an easy-to-read font, such as Times New Roman or Courier. Don't use an overly-stylized typeface—it's too hard to read and gets distracting. A font size of 11 or 12 points is good. Left justify only. Indent at the beginning of each paragraph, and don't skip extra lines between paragraphs. Use a one and a quarter inch margin on the sides and bottom of each page. Your top margin will be an inch and a half.

First page: In the top left corner, print your name, address, phone number and email. You can also add your web site or blog. In the upper right corner, you'll print the number of words in your manuscript. For picture books and magazine pieces, show an exact word count (minus title, your personal info, and headers from following pages). Then drop down about a half page, type your title, double space, then start your text.

Following pages: Add a header to the upper left corner of each page with your Last Name/Title of Book. Number the pages consecutively in the upper right corner.

Do not break a picture book manuscript up into 28 blocks of text, to represent the 28 pages of text in the finished book. Your entire picture book manuscript might be one to four pages long. And don't add any notes to the illustrator, unless an illustration detail is absolutely necessary to the plot and cannot be inferred in any way from the text. If you need to add an illustrator's note, be as brief as possible.

Your submissions package would also include a brief cover letter, which simply

gives the title, age range and genre of the manuscript (humorous bedtime story; biography; historical fiction, etc.), the word count, and a very brief synopsis (1-3 sentences). If you have any previous publishing credits or particular expertise on the topic of your book, list those in the cover letter as well.

Also, be sure to include a self-addressed, stamped envelope every time you contact an editor by mail. Send a business-sized envelope with one stamp if you just want the editor's response (and note in your letter that your manuscript can be recycled), or an envelope large enough and with enough postage to return everything. Many publishers are now saying they won't return manuscripts over 13 ounces in weight because the Post Office requires these be delivered to the window in person, so you'll just send a business-sized envelope. Details will be on each publisher's guidelines found on their website.

If submitting by mail print your manuscript and cover letter on white paper, place flat in a 9 x 12 envelope with your return stamped, self-addressed envelope (do not staple pages together), and address according to the publisher's guidelines.

If submitting by email, paste the entire text of your manuscript into the body of the email, following your cover letter. Only submit by email if the publisher's guidelines state that you can do so.

Note: These formatting requirements are the same for submitting to literary agents. Check each agent's website for specific submission procedures.

To find publisher's submission guidelines, go to the publisher's website and search for "Author Guidelines", "Submission Guidelines", "Manuscript Submissions" or "Contact Us". You can also read about publishers' needs in writing publications such as *Children's Book Insider: The Children's Writing Monthly* (<http://cbiclubhouse.com/clubhouse/>) .

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