



So You Want to Write a Picture Book

Class Outline



— Picture Book Basics: Terminology —

- board books — 50 to 500 words
 - 10–15 spreads with 12 spreads being the sweet spot
 - *Little Blue Truck*
- concept books — 50 to 500 words
 - often board books
 - *Ten Little Ladybugs*
- picture books — 50 to 1,500 words
 - roughly ages 3 to 8
 - often 32 pages, but may be 24, 40, or other multiple of 8
 - *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*
- early readers — 250 to 3,000 words
 - roughly ages 5 to 7
 - *Amelia Bedelia*

— Other Key Terms —

- Page vs. spread
- Title, half title, and copyright pages



— Know Your Audience —

Kids, kids, kids! (And grownups too!)

Learn more about your audience by . . .

- Observe them in their natural habitat.
- Read what they're reading.
- Talk to your local children's librarian.
- Browse the bookstores.
- Check out the bestseller lists.



— Idea —

What is the story you want to tell?

Why do you want to tell it?

Will this story connect with kids? Does it have heart?

Universal "connections" and story themes

- love and attachment — *Guess How Much I Love You*
- feeling safe, facing your fears — *Chrysanthemum*
- overcoming a problem — *How Rocket Learned to Read*
- friendship and belonging, to be included — *Stick and Stone*
- fear or loss — *God Is Always Good*
- laughter or humor — *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*

What emotion do you want readers take away with them?

Why would a child say, "Read it again!"?

Positive messages are better than negative messages.



— Vocabulary —

Do . . .

- Do consider age- and reading-levels.
- Do use context to introduce new words.
- Do remember kids at picture-book age are literal thinkers, so be careful of figurative language (e.g.: I have a frog in my throat.).

<https://www.lifeway.com/en/special-emphasis/levels-of-biblical-learning>

- Do avoid using “church-speak” and “Christian-ese.”

Don't . . .

- Don't talk down to kids.
- Don't preach.
- Don't tell them what to do.



— Rhyming, Rhythm, & Repetition —

Picture books are meant to be read aloud, so sound is critical.

Should your book rhyme?

- It's not as easy as you might think.
- Would prose work better?

Writing with rhythm to make your book "sing."

- Give your words rhythm.
- Map out those stressed and unstressed syllables.
- Vary sentence lengths. Don't be afraid to use fragments.
- Near rhymes and slant rhymes are great for making prose books sing.
- Repeating vowels sounds creates a pattern that sounds good.
- Use repetition to build rhythm.



— Voice —

Voice = word choice + rhythm

Word choice = vocabulary

Rhythm = sentence length + punctuation

For playful, lively writing, use devices like . . .

- fun, active words
- alliteration
- repetition
- internal and near rhymes
- onomatopoeia
- questions that directly address the reader
- humor and sass
- shorter sentences
- exclamation points

For more lyrical writing, use devices like:

- soft, soothing words
- a sense of wonder
- alliteration
- repetition
- internal and near rhymes
- similes and metaphors
- longer sentences



— Point of View —

First person, the narrator is the person the story is happening to and will use words like “me” or “I.” For example, *I Talk Like a River*

Second person, the narrator is placing the reader within the story and will use words like “you” or “your.” For example, *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*

Third person, a narrator is telling the story from outside the action and uses words like “he” or “she.” For example, *Corduroy*

— Character —

Characters must be interesting and engaging to kids.

Consider choosing a main character who is a little older.

The main character must have an objective, a goal, a problem to overcome.

- They must have a motivation.
- It should take the character several attempts to reach their goal or overcome the problem.
- Show why it is important that the character succeed.



— Story Structure —

Problem and Solution

page 1: ½ title

page 2: copyright page

page 3: title page

page 4–5: Introduce the character in their “normal” world

pages 6–7: Introduce the problem (goal, obstacle to overcome, situation to face or to work through).

pages 8–9: Add the drama and tension. What’s at stake? Why is this important? What happens if they don’t get what they want?

pages 10–18: First attempt is a failure. Raise the stakes. Make the challenge bigger, the problem worse. Second attempt fails. Raise the stakes again. Have at least three attempts—and odd numbers are best. At some point, the character considers giving up.

pages 19–26 Eureka! It’s the lightbulb moment. It’s the third (or final)—and biggest attempt to solve the problem.

pages 27–29 This is the climax of the book. This must work, or doom!

pages 30–32 Resolution: it worked! Hooray!

*Adapted from a Structure by Mary Kole; <https://kidlit.com/picture-book-structure/>



Story Structure: Three Act Structure.

Symmetrical Picture Storybook Paradigm

Act I: The Beginning that introduces the character and sets the scene (about 20% of the story, or 5–7 pages for a 32-page picture book).

- Plot Twist I: Big surprise! Trouble, problem, or adventure. It separates the Beginning from the Middle.

Act II: The Middle, or the primary action or conflict (about 60% of the story). It includes the . . .

- Midpoint: A moment in the middle that splits the story into a “before” and an “after.”
- Plot Twist II: Plot twist! It separates the Middle from the Ending.

Act III: This contains the resolution or ending (about 20% of the story, or 5–7 pages).

*adapted from Eve Heidi Bine-Stock’s *How to Write a Children's Picture Book: Volume 1: Structure*



— Also Remember —

Begin and end quickly.

If you get stuck in the middle, and can't figure out how to keep going, ask this question: *And then what?*

Give your illustrator something to illustrate.

Choose a fabulous title.

— Storyboards —

Download free storyboard templates at www.tamafortner.com/freebies

— Rewrites and Edits —

The best writing is in the rewrites.

Edit ruthlessly.

Watch your word count.

- Get rid of unnecessary dialog tags.
- Get rid of unnecessary backstory.
- Get rid of adjectives and description that the illustrator can show.



— Show, Don't Tell —

A simple definition:

- **Show, don't tell** is using imagery and description to show the reader what is happening rather than simply telling them.

Tips:

- Search your manuscript for words like *is*, *are*, *was*, or *were*.
- Show it through the setting.
- Show it through dialogue.
- Show it through action.
- Show it through one or more of the five senses.



— Beta Readers —

Read it aloud.

Get others to record themselves reading it aloud.

— Before all, above all and through all . . . pray. —

Lord,
*Fill our minds, our hearts,
our fingers with Your words.*
Amen

