

# CHILDREN'S BOOKS: FORMATS

## BOARD BOOKS

This format lets children experiment with books. They are big enough for toddlers to grab and manipulate, and the content helps them make connections between hearing words and seeing pictures. Not every page must be read; a random order of experiencing the pages is fine.

- thick cardboard covers
- pages are thick cardstock or cardboard
- types: concept, nursery rhyme, wordless, question-and-answer
- often made from popular picture books that translate well to a younger readership
- interactive, often with novelty features
- sometimes written in-house
- sell well and make great gifts
- word count: 0-100
- age range: 0-4
- Examples: *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* by Bill Martin Jr. and Eric Carle; *Trunk or Treat* by Michelle Medlock Adams and Marilee Harrald-Pilz

## PICTURE BOOKS

This is the format most people think of when they talk about children's books.

- distinctive works of art
- highly illustrated
- the pictures are not redundant to the story but must tell 50% of the story
- illustrated by professional artists, not necessarily the author of the text
- most are 32 pages (the next most common lengths are 16, 24, 48)
- target audience is typically ages 4-8
- text is lively, active, and engaging

- simple, clear plot based on a single situation and told from a child's viewpoint
- word count: 0-1000; shorter is better! most editors want only 600 or 500 or 300 words; Editor Mary Kole says 600 max
- Examples: *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* by Mo Willems, *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak, *Pete the Cat* by James Dean, Kimberly Dean, and Eric Litwin

## PICTURE STORYBOOKS

- longer picture books; word count up to 1500+
- slightly older age group; slightly more involved plot
- many picture storybooks are older; of the newer titles, many are nonfiction and/or written by established authors
- a hard sell for a debut author
- manuscripts at this length can often be shortened to a standard picture book length
- Examples: Patricia Polacco books like *Pink and Say*, Max Lucado's *You Are Special* and *You Are Mine*

## READERS (EASY, EARLY, and LEVELED)

- 6 x 9 trim size
- vertical orientation
- typically 32 to 64 pp
- heavily illustrated
- simple, repetitive text at a specific reading level
- for emerging readers
- focus on phonics
- simple vocabulary and syntax
- short words, sentences, paragraphs; sometimes broken into short chapters
- content is lighthearted, often character-based
- limited number of characters, but interesting plot and characters to keep the reader engaged
- reader gets clues from the pictures, so they must match text

- often in leveled series
- often written in-house or by assignment
- word count: 50-400
- age range: 4-9 (Preschool-Grade 3)
- Examples: I Can Read books (*Harry the Dirty Dog, Frog and Toad*); Step into Reading books (*No Mail for Mitchell*); Hello Reader! books (*Hiccups for Elephant, Amelia Bedelia*); Ready to Read (*Susan B. Anthony: Fighter for Women's Rights*)

## CHAPTER BOOKS

- primarily tells the story through words rather than pictures
- some spot art
- more complex stories and characters
- word count: 4,000-15,000 (wide range)
- page count: 100-160
- age range: 6-9
- Examples: *Clementine, Ivy & Bean, Geronimo Stilton, Junie B. Jones, Magic Tree House, Captain Underpants*

## MIDDLE GRADE NOVELS

- focus on friends, family, and the character's immediate world and his/her relationship to it (In contrast, YA characters discover how they fit in the larger world, beyond friends and family.)
- characters react to what happens to them; minimal self-reflection
- protagonist is age 10-13
- clean & wholesome; no profanity, graphic violence, or sexuality (romance, if any, is limited to a crush or a first kiss at most—in the general market)
- word count: young MG 15K-30K; middle MG 30K-50K; upper MG 45-65K (fantasy)
- age range: 8-12 (10-14 for upper MG)
- grades: 3-8 (upper elementary mostly; not necessarily "middle school")
- Examples: *Because of Winn-Dixie, From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler, Merci Suarez Changes Gears*

## YOUNG ADULT NOVELS

- YA characters discover how they fit in the larger world, beyond friends and family
- reflecting on self and what happens in the world
- often told in first person
- profanity, graphic violence, romance, and sexuality are allowable in general market
- complex story lines and read like adult novels, except with topics teens are interested in
- verse novels are popular
- protagonist is age 14-18
- readers' age range: 13-18+
- Examples: Jenny B. Jones and Bryan Davis books in Christian market; the *Hunger Games* and *Twilight* series; *To Stay Alive* (verse novel)

## HOMING IN ON THE FORMAT FOR YOUR IDEA

1. What is the age of your target audience?
2. What types of books does your target audience read?
3. Will this story be read aloud to the child exclusively?
4. Will the story rely heavily on illustrations to communicate part of the plot or a subplot?
5. Do you intend for the reader to learn how to read using your story?
6. Do you intend for the child to be able to read the text independently?
7. What age is your main character? (Remember: Kids "read up.")
8. Is your intended reader a new or experienced reader?
9. Is the plot simple or does it include subplots?
10. Is the story focused on the main character's family, friends, and immediate world?
11. Is the main character discovering how he or she fits in the larger world, beyond friends and family?
12. Is the main character highly self-reflective?

## RESOURCES

### WEBSITES

12 x 12 Challenge for Picture Book Writers: [www.12x12challenge.com](http://www.12x12challenge.com).

100 Most Frequent Words in Books for Beginning Readers:  
[www.mcrel.org/PDF/Literacy/4006CM\\_100words.pdf](http://www.mcrel.org/PDF/Literacy/4006CM_100words.pdf)

Accelerated Reader Book Find: [www.arbookfind.com](http://www.arbookfind.com)

Dolch Sight Words: <http://www.english-zone.com/reading/dolch.html>

Kidlit411: [www.kidlit411.com](http://www.kidlit411.com).

SCBWI (Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators): [www.scbwi.org](http://www.scbwi.org).

Storystorm Challenge: <https://taralazar.com/storystorm/>

### BOOKS & ARTICLES

Ashman, Linda. *The Nuts and Bolts Guide to Writing Picture Books*. This extensive booklet is available through her website: [www.lindaashman.com](http://www.lindaashman.com).

Dils, Tracey E. *You Can Write Children's Books*. Writer's Digest Books, 1998.

Jones, Amy, editor. *2020 Children's Writer's and Illustrator's Market*. Writer's Digest Books, 2019.

Kole, Mary. *Writing Irresistible Kidlit*. Writer's Digest Books, 2012.

Lamba, Marie. "The Key Differences Between Middle Grade and Young Adult." *Writer's Digest*, August 7, 2014. <https://www.writersdigest.com/online-editor/the-key-differences-between-middle-grade-vs-young-adult>

Shaffer, Sylvie. "New for New Readers: What (Exactly) Is An Easy Reader." *The Horn Book*, May 12, 2019. <https://www.hbook.com/?detailStory=what-exactly-is-an-easy-reader>

Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. *The Book: Essential Guide to Publishing for Children 2020*.