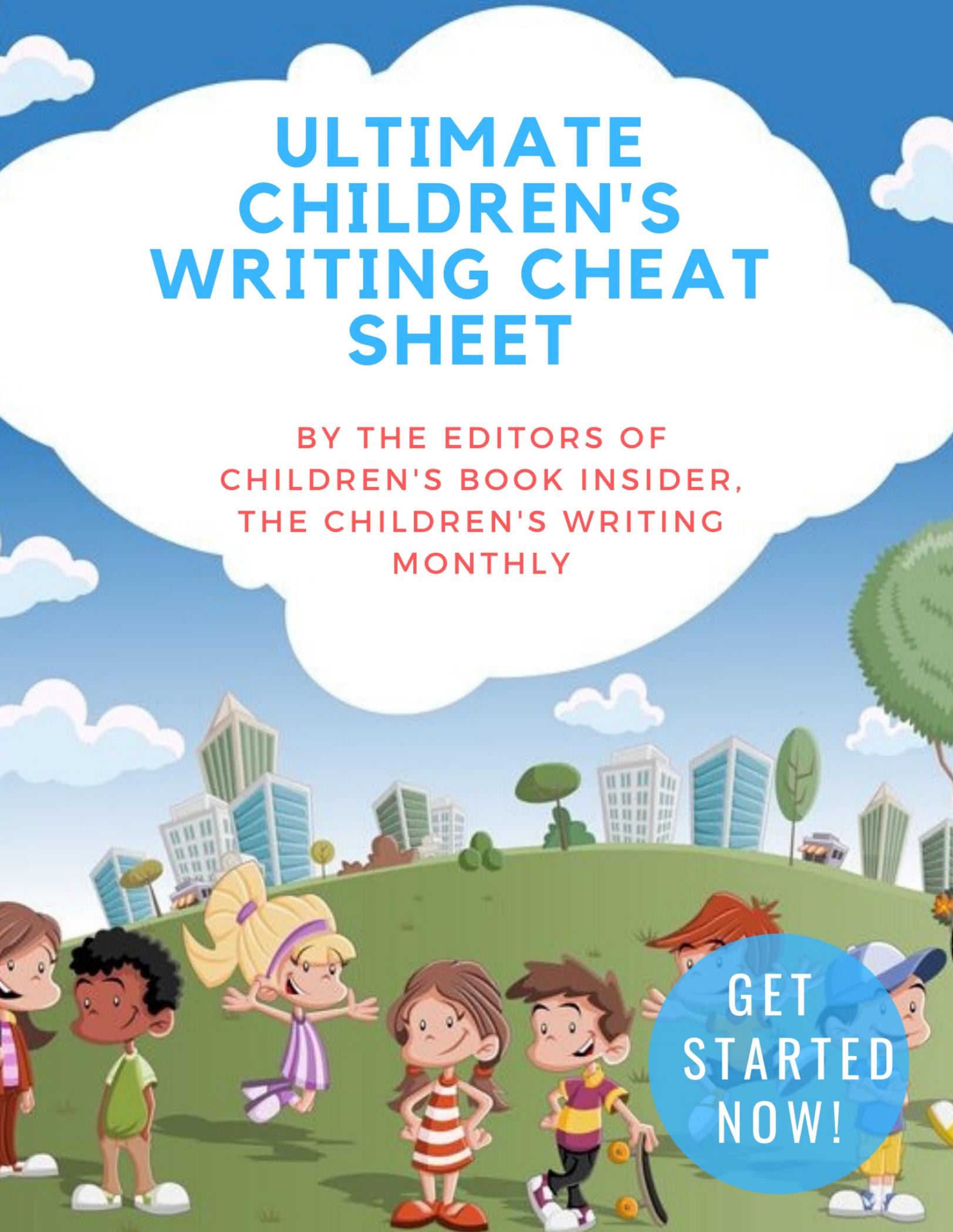


ULTIMATE CHILDREN'S WRITING CHEAT SHEET

BY THE EDITORS OF
CHILDREN'S BOOK INSIDER,
THE CHILDREN'S WRITING
MONTHLY



GET
STARTED
NOW!

ULTIMATE CHILDREN'S WRITING CHEAT SHEET

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WELCOME TO CHILDREN'S BOOK INSIDER

Could there be a more noble pursuit than providing hope, joy, laughter, connection and knowledge to young people?

Writing for children and teens is an opportunity to change the world with your words, to shape and influence the next generation and to provide a lifeline to young readers in a tumultuous world.

For more than three decades, we here at Children's Book Insider have been honored to help folks just like you embark on this wonderful journey.

We're so glad you found us. Now, let's start writing!

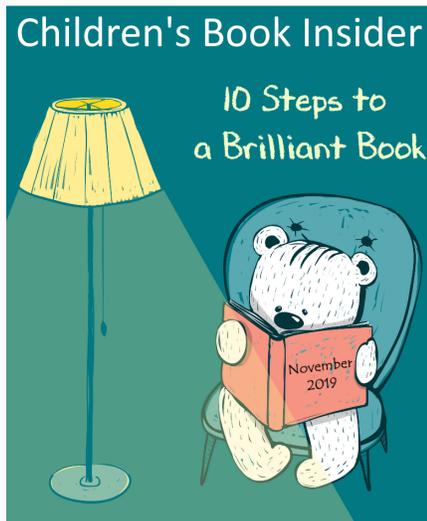
Jon Laura

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THE WORLD OF CHILDREN'S BOOK INSIDER

CHILDREN'S BOOK INSIDER, THE CHILDREN'S WRITING MONTHLY



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Jon, Laura & Matt:

The Family Behind Children's Book Insider since 1990.

TOP KIDLIT WRITING FAQs

DO I NEED AN ILLUSTRATOR?

Unless you are a professionally-trained illustrator, do not submit illustrations with your manuscript. The editor will pair your text with an appropriate illustrator, and will pay that illustrator separately. Do not submit illustrations with your manuscript that were created by someone else (an artist, a relative, your child), unless the publisher's submission guidelines specifically state they are open to author/illustrator teams. The illustrations in children's books are extremely important in helping convey the nuances of the text to the reader as well as the book's tone and design, and should be created by a professional who the editor trusts to do high-quality work. Often an editor will match up a new author with an experienced illustrator who already has a following to help boost book sales.

DO I NEED TO COPYRIGHT MY WORK?

The moment your work is in tangible form—once you type it, save it, write it, or otherwise commit words to paper—it is protected under copyright law without any formal registration, even if you do not use the copyright symbol. Once you have a publishing contract, the publisher will officially register the work in your name with the US Copyright Office, which allows you greater power to litigate and collect damages should someone steal your work. For more information, go to <https://www.copyright.gov/>

TOP KIDLIT WRITING FAQs

CAN I SEND MY MANUSCRIPT TO MORE THAN ONE EDITOR OR AGENT AT A TIME?

Answer: It depends

Most agents and editors will ask you to first send a query, which is a one page letter briefly summarizing the book. Some agents and editors ask for sample manuscript pages to accompany the query. If the author is also an illustrator, a link to online illustration samples can be included.

You can submit queries to several agents at once, but if more than one agent asks to see the entire manuscript, send that to one agent at a time, in the order of their response. If the first agent passes, then move on to the next agent.

With editors, you can also send several queries at once. If several editors ask to see the entire manuscript, you can send it to more than one editor at a time as long as each editor accepts "simultaneous submissions" (meaning the manuscript is being read by another editor at the same time). Note in your cover letter accompanying the full manuscript that this is a simultaneous submission. If an editor requires an exclusive submission, send only to that editor and wait for a response. Note: Occasionally, an editor will require an exclusive submission on a query letter as well as the full manuscript. Query this editor exclusively IF that editor is at the top of your list of potential markets for your work. If you haven't gotten a response in three months, send a polite email telling the editor she's welcome to keep your query under consideration, but since she's had it exclusively for 90 days you'll also be submitting it elsewhere.

LAURA'S 12 FAVORITE KIDLIT FICTION BOOKS TO STUDY & SAVOR



If you want to write for children, you need to read children's books. A lot of children's books. Read classic books that have stood the test of time and determine why they're still in print (Do they explore timeless themes that are relevant to generation after generation? Are the characters so unique that they never become outdated?). Also read recently-published books to discover the tone, pacing, and creative writing styles that appeal to kids today. Note what you love about each book—and what you don't—and use that to inform your own writing. Above all, notice how each book makes you *feel*. How did the author forge that emotional connection with you, the reader? Use this as a template for creating that same emotional connection in your own work.

1. ***Where the Wild Things Are*** by Maurice Sendak
2. ***Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge*** by Mem Fox, illustrated by Julie Vivas
3. ***Bear Came Along*** by Richard Morris, illustrated by LeUyen Pham

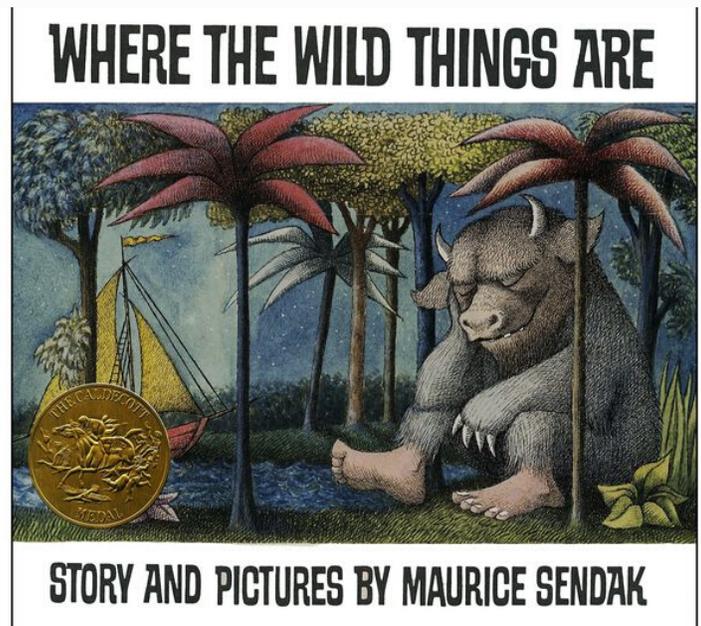
Three perfect picture books, published in 1963, 1984 and 2019.

4. ***Amelia Bedelia*** by Peggy Parish, illustrated by Fritz Siebel (easy reader, 1963)
5. ***We Are In a Book!*** by Mo Willems (Elephant and Piggie easy reader series, 2007)
6. ***Polly Diamond and the Magic Book, Book 1*** by Alice Kuipers, illustrated by Diana Toledano (chapter book series, 2018)
7. ***The Poet's Dog*** by Patricia MacLachlan (chapter book, 2016)
8. ***Charlotte's Web*** by E.B. White, illustrated by Garth Williams (middle grade, 1952)
9. ***Because of Winn-Dixie*** by Kate DiCamillo (middle grade, 2000. After this, read everything else Kate DiCamillo has written.)
9. ***Pax*** by Sarah Pennypacker, illustrated by Jon Klassen (young adult, 2019)
11. ***The Giver*** by Lois Lowry (young adult, 1993)
12. ***Long Way Down*** by Jason Reynolds (young adult, 2017. Then read everything else he's written.)

PICTURE BOOKS AT A GLANCE

What is a Picture Book?

- Illustrated stories and nonfiction for children ages 3-6, or 4-8. Designed to be read out loud to a child.
 - Text averages 1000 words or less (500-800 words is most common); books average 32 pages.
 - The text focuses on the characters, plot and action of the book. Very little description. For nonfiction, text can center on basic information the reader would find interesting and relevant to their lives, or be in a narrative format (as with picture book biographies).
 - Language is interesting to listen to (can be rhyming, rhythmic, or straight prose). Complex words are fine if the child can get their meaning from the context of the sentence.
 - Illustrations work with the words and add to the meaning of the story.
- Characters can be children, animals, fantasy characters or adults, but they embody the worldview and sensibility of a child the age of the reader.
 - Plots are action-based, with a new scene every page or two.
 - Themes are straightforward, concrete and taken at face value. The picture-book aged child can't yet think in abstract terms or make large inferences as to the meaning of the story.

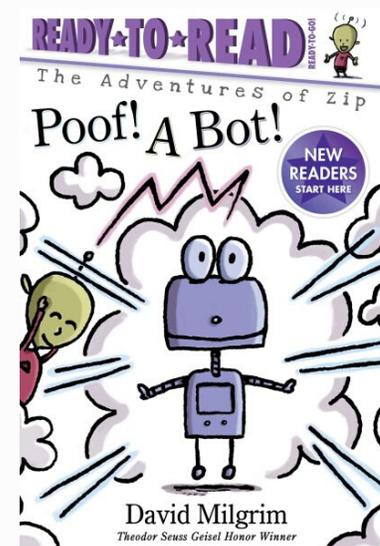
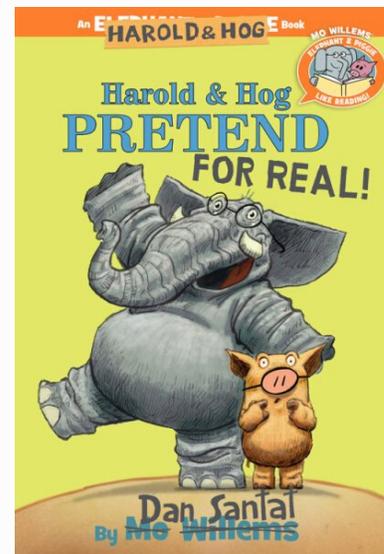


EASY READERS AT A GLANCE

What is an Easy Reader?

- For readers kindergarten through second or third grade.
 - Designed to be read by children just learning to read on their own.
 - Books can be 32-64 pages long, fiction or nonfiction, with texts ranging from about 50 words up to 2000 words.
 - Books are “leveled”, with the simplest, shortest stories being Level 1, getting longer and more complex as the levels increase. Higher levels may have short chapters. Each publisher has its own leveling system.
 - Characters can be children, animals, fantasy creatures or adults, as long as they think and act like children the age of the reader.
 - Stories are told through action and dialogue. Very little description. Illustrations on every page (or nearly every page) help convey the meaning of the text.
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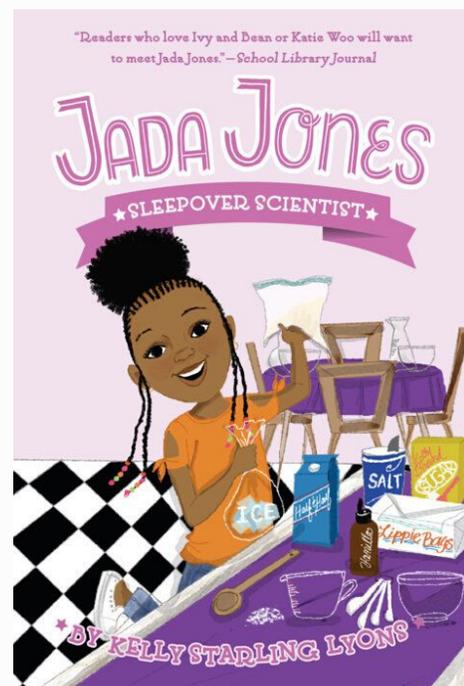
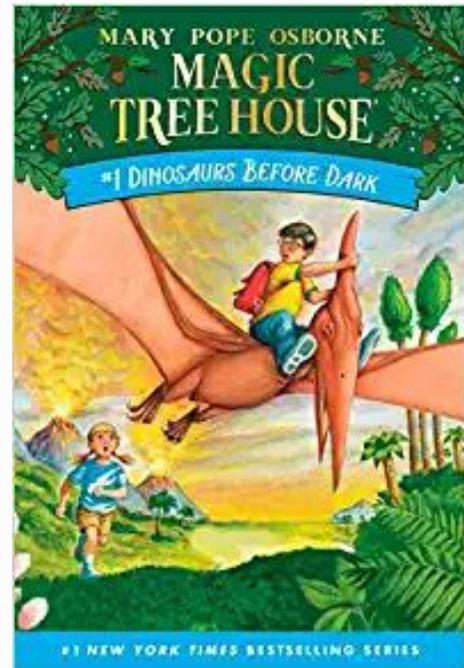
- Sentences are short and grammatically simple. Lower levels focus on one-syllable words; as the levels increase the words can get slightly more complex and sentences longer.
- Humor is very important.



CHAPTER BOOKS AT A GLANCE

What is a Chapter Book?

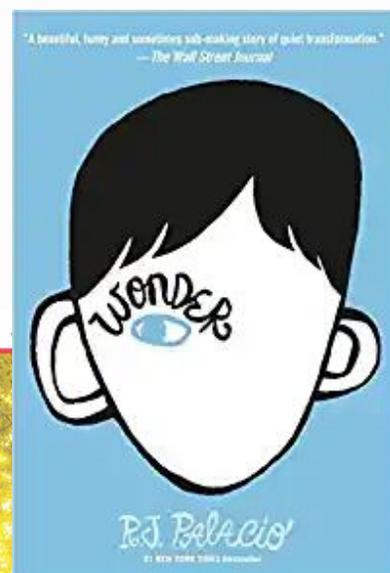
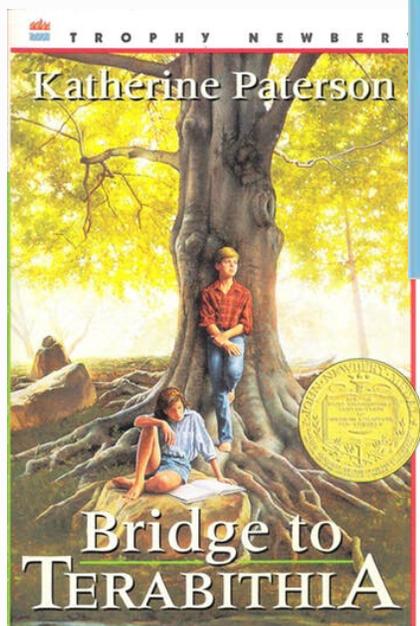
- Called “transitional books” (ages 6-9), or “chapter books” (ages 7-10), these short novels are broken into chapters that average 3-5 pages each.
- Books range from 64-96 pages; manuscripts average 6000-15,000 words (transitional books being on the shorter end).
- Characters can be animals, fantasy creatures or children, though child characters are the most common.
- Stories are told primarily through action and dialogue, though some minor description is acceptable.
- Dialogue scenes are longer than in easy readers (up to an entire book page), and characters begin to be developed through their thoughts and inner lives as well as their words and actions.
- Though story possibilities range from mysteries to humor to fantasy, plots that revolve around family, friends and school are most common.



MIDDLE GRADE BOOKS AT A GLANCE

What is a Middle Grade Book?

- Novels or nonfiction for ages 8-12 or 10-14. Lengths can vary from 84-200 pages (novels are usually over 100 pages long), or 20,000-40,000 words. Illustrated nonfiction may have fewer words.
- Characters are children ages 9-14 (average character in middle grade novel is 10-13 years old). Protagonists can also be animals or fantasy creatures. Adults are almost never central characters.
- Stories can be in any genre (mysteries, fantasy, historical, and contemporary are popular), but the central conflict must be relevant to the middle grade reader.
- Characters are focused inward (Who am I? Where do I fit in?), adolescent emotions are dramatic, and concerns with peers, image, gaining independence from parents, making own decisions and developing unique talents are paramount.
- Plots are more complex, with one to three sub-plots that relate to the main action in the story.
- Formats range from journal entries to illustrated novels to stories written in free verse.
- Nonfiction builds on basic knowledge of a subject, and pushes readers to think about their place in the world and develop their own values and opinions.
- Characters grow and change during the book, but are still emotionally and intellectually adolescents at the end.

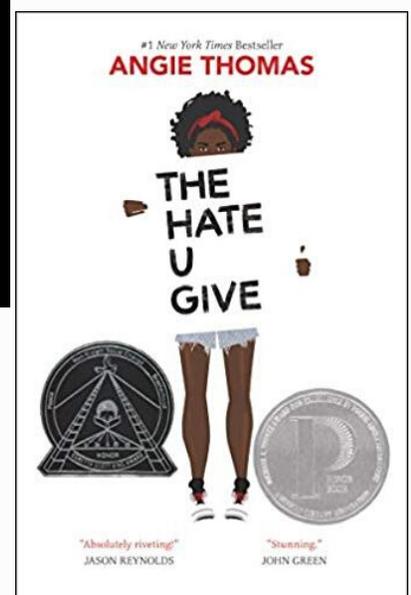
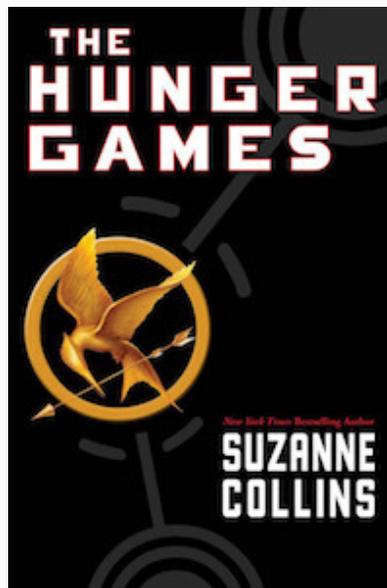


YOUNG ADULT BOOKS AT A GLANCE

What is a Young Adult Book?

- Fiction and nonfiction for ages 12 and up or 14 and up. Books tend to be 150 pages or longer. Manuscripts are generally 40,000 words and higher.
- Fiction can be any genre. Some of the most popular are fantasy, paranormal, dystopian, cyber punk, science fiction, historical, thriller, mystery and contemporary stories.
- Nonfiction can be complex and delve deeply into a topic.
- Characters are teens ages 12 and up, though most are in high school. Fantasy or sci-fi protagonists would also embody the teenage mindset.
- Characters are taking more control of their lives (or seeing the need to take control, and trying to figure out how to do it), contemplating their place in the larger world, and thinking about who they want to be as adults.
- Adults tend to be secondary characters, or serve as the antagonists.

- Stories are often told in first person, with the protagonist's voice, feelings and perspective filtering the events of the plot for the reader.
- Plot and character are developed over longer scenes of dialogue.
- Characters grow and change over the course of the story, moving from adolescence to adulthood by the end.



WHICH KIDLIT CATEGORY IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

ARE **PICTURE BOOKS** RIGHT FOR YOU?

- Do you think visually, even if you're not an illustrator?
- Can your writing style be pared down to the essential words, with very little description?
- Are you able to let go of every detail of the story, leaving room for the illustrator to add to your words with pictures?
- Are you able to relate to the sensibilities and perspective of a child under eight years old, without being condescending?
- Do you have a vivid imagination?

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ARE **EASY READERS** RIGHT FOR YOU?

- Can you tell an interesting story with a beginning, middle and end in simple sentences?
- Do you understand the sense of humor of a child 5-8 years old?
- Can you develop a plot with action and dialogue, and leave the description to the pictures?
- Can you make the reading experience fun, so the child feels a sense of accomplishment?

WHICH KIDLIT CATEGORY IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

ARE **CHAPTER BOOKS** RIGHT FOR YOU?

- Do you have a strong connection to kids in second, third and fourth grades?
- Can you develop characters and a conflict that is relevant to the average 8, 9 or 10-year-old?
- Can you write longer scenes of dialogue that sound authentic to the characters?
- Are your story or nonfiction ideas a bit meatier than an easy reader book, but still fairly straightforward?

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WHICH KIDLIT CATEGORY IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

ARE **MIDDLE GRADE** BOOKS RIGHT FOR YOU?

- Do you understand the emotional development, life experience and world view of kids on the cusp of adolescence and entering puberty?
- Can you write about the above without letting your adult perspective enter the book?
- Are you tuned in to the conflicts, drama and everyday situations of this age group?
- Can you write convincing dialogue and create unique characters?
- Are you willing to let your characters make mistakes and then learn from what they've done?

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WHICH KIDLIT CATEGORY IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

ARE **YOUNG ADULT** BOOKS RIGHT FOR YOU?

- Are you finely tuned into the attitudes, relationships, behaviors, values and mindset of teens? These attitudes would apply whether you're writing historical, science fiction, fantasy or contemporary fiction.
- Can you develop your characters through dialogue, their thoughts, body language and how they react to other characters?
- Does your protagonist have a strong, unique voice that teens can relate to?
- Are you willing to put your characters in high-stakes situations, let them make mistakes and bad decisions, and allow them to act as teens, not adults?
- Is your idea complex enough to support several sub-plots?
- Are you comfortable with the possibility of not having a neatly-wrapped, happy ending, but rather a realistic one?

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9 REASONS WHY WRITING FOR MAGAZINES MAY BE PERFECT FOR YOU

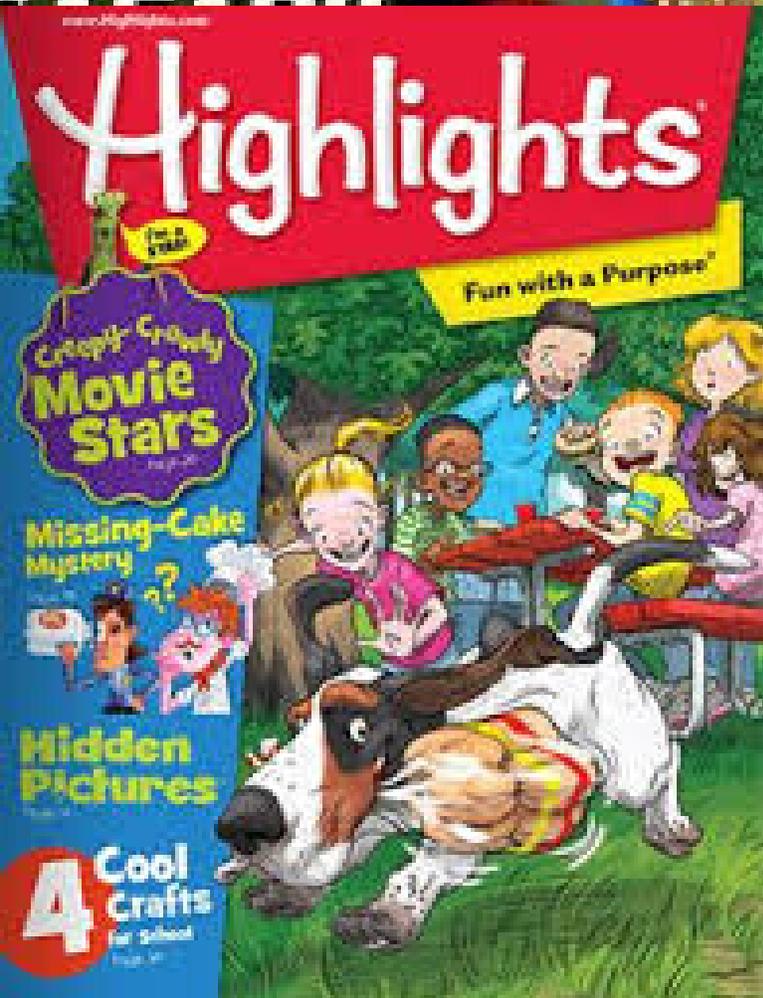


If your definition of breaking into publishing includes writing and selling a 300-page novel, or convincing a publisher to invest thousands of dollars in your picture book, you're overlooking a substantial part of the market.

Magazines need new material on a weekly or monthly basis. Some writers start off by writing for magazines in the hopes of moving up to the "higher" art form of the book. But magazine writing can also be fulfilling and challenging.

Writing for magazines is a fine art in itself, not a mere stepping stone to publishing a book. You have to write a fun and compelling article in a limited amount of space. You have to "hook" the reader with reasons for why she should stay with you—rather than flipping the page. You have to convince an editor that you have the expertise, research abilities, and time management skills to fulfill your assignment.

Whether you choose to stick with magazines exclusively or eventually move on to books, magazine assignments will sharpen skills you'll use in any type of writing. Here are a few of the perks:



(next page...)

9 REASONS WHY WRITING FOR MAGAZINES MAY BE PERFECT FOR YOU (CONTINUED)

- **You learn how to write concisely.** Writing with a deadline and a limited amount of space will hone your craft.
- **You learn time management skills.** Racing to complete assignments is great for developing discipline
- **You learn how to study a niche in the market.** Understanding your editor's needs and providing an article that is compatible with the style and the audience of the magazine will make you a better writer.
- **You'll get your name in print.** Your confidence will be boosted with each publication, and you will attain credentials that will enhance your reputation as a writer.
- **You will understand editors better.** As you develop relationships with magazine editors, you'll understand the challenges that editors face on a daily basis. No matter where your writing career takes you, you'll gain insight into the publishing industry and human nature.
- **You'll have fun.** While you might not feel up to a novel, writing for magazines will help you find your niche as an author. You will receive immediate feedback, and most likely not have to wait a few years to see the fruits of your labor in print.
- **You'll create new ideas every time you write an article.** You are being paid to brainstorm and be creative and to express yourself within the confines of a publication's needs. What could be better than that?
- **You will make connections.** By writing for magazines, you will network in a natural way that might lead to more publications and other exciting opportunities.
- **You'll discover your true passions and interests.** When you begin researching topics in detail, you will learn and discover new interests. Perhaps you will even become an expert in a field you never knew existed. What could be better than that?

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5 WAYS TO IMPROVE ANY MANUSCRIPT

Revision is an intricate and important part of the writing process, and one which many writers would rather ignore. After the initial excitement of finally finishing your book, the thought of going over the manuscript again and again can seem tedious. But books that have not been carefully revised will almost always be rejected, so spending the time now can save you frustration in the long run. An editor will read a promising manuscript several times, first looking at the whole story and then at the details. Your revisions should follow the same pattern. The following are tips to help you make the most of your rewrites.

1. Put the manuscript away. The most useful thing you can do, upon completing your manuscript, is to set it aside for at least a week and start on something else. Once you've put some distance between yourself and your work, you'll be better able to read it again with an objective eye.

2. Read the whole book from start to finish in one sitting. Don't make any changes now, but jot notes to yourself in the margins of the manuscript if anything pops out as needing work. With this reading, look at the whole story.

Does the beginning grab the reader? Does the action flow smoothly from chapter to chapter? Did you leave out important details that the reader needs to be able to follow the story? Is the ending logical and satisfying? Now go back and revise these big structural points. Repeat Steps 1 and 2 until you're satisfied with the overall story.

3. Cut, condense and tighten. Once you have the major elements of your book in place, you're ready to cut. Almost every book is overwritten in the early drafts. Look at long scenes and see where you can eliminate unnecessary details to keep the action moving.

Condense lengthy passages of dialogue down to the essential elements. Replace two words with one, especially with verbs (plodded to school has more emotional weight than walked slowly to school). With nonfiction, check if you've repeated points over and over.

The hardest thing to do as a writer is to cut, but if you can learn to sacrifice individual words, sentences, even chapters for the good of the whole book, you'll find your job is much easier.

(next page..)

4. Look at the details. Now you're going to go through the book, paragraph by paragraph, and fine-tune your prose. Even if you're sure the opening scene grabs the reader, can the first sentence be improved? Does something happen in the last paragraph of each chapter that makes the reader want to turn the page and see what happens next?

With picture books, do your descriptions create strong, specific visual images? Does each sentence of dialogue move the story forward or give insight into the personality of the speaker? Can you add details to nonfiction that make the topic more relevant to your readers' lives, such as analogies or humorous examples?

This is the step where you work to make your writing as good as it can be.

5. Watch out for weak spots. Know where your weaknesses are as a writer and learn to spot them in your manuscript.

Punctuation (especially in dialogue) is a problem with some writers. Others overuse vague adjectives and adverbs (words like very, little and big rarely add to a description – instead, use specific terms that create an exact picture in your readers' minds).

Be aware of words you use over and over. Finally, make sure you as the author remain invisible. Avoid speaking directly to the reader (And what do you think happened next?) or giving your opinion of your characters' actions (Jake wisely decided to call his mother). It's up to your readers to label your characters' behavior as right or wrong.

The editor who reads your manuscript will appreciate the time you take to revise. And you'll appreciate it when you get an offer for a publishing contract.



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PUBLISHING GLOSSARY: BASICS

Antagonist: the anti-hero or force who works to keep the protagonist from reaching his goal.

Audience: the people the book is targeted for.

Character: the people in a story.

Clips: samples of a writer's work. Many publishers require an author to submit clips before assigning a story or article to that author.

Cover letter: the letter accompanying a manuscript.

Dialogue: conversation between characters.

Draft: a version of a manuscript.

Final draft: the edited, corrected copy of a manuscript.

Freelancer: an independent writer who works on a project-by-project basis rather than on salary.

Manuscript: a work before it is typeset and printed, originally meaning "hand written."

Plot: a structured series of cause and effect events designed to achieve the main character's goal.

Protagonist: the main character(s) in a book.

Rejection letter: a letter from an editor indicating that the publisher does not want to purchase a manuscript. These are frequently sent electronically now.

Response time: the time span it takes for an editor to respond to a submission. This may be months or even a year or more.

Rough draft: an unedited, uncorrected version of a manuscript.

Self-publish: an author performing (or hiring others to perform) everything a publisher normally does, from editing to illustrating to printing and distributing the book.

Setting: where a story takes place. This may be as narrow as a school classroom or as broad as a galaxy.

Synopsis: a short overview of a book. This is written in present tense and "tells" the story in chronological order as it occurs.

Traditional publishing: publishing a book through a publishing house where the publisher does the art work, printing, distribution, etc.

PUBLISHING GLOSSARY: ADVANCED

AAR: Association of Author's Representatives, a collection of reputable agents.

Acquisitions editor: the editor who makes an offer to an author for a work.

Advance: money paid in anticipation of sales to an author by a publisher or illustrator before the book goes on the market. Authors "earn back" the advance from royalties on book sales.

All rights: the publisher has the right to use the work exclusively.

Backlist: previously published books.

Character arc: the internal plot. Usually this is the emotional and intellectual growth the character goes through during the story.

Climax: the point of highest tension in a story and the turning point in the narrative arc from rising action to falling action.

Copy editor: the editor who reviews a manuscript for spelling, style, punctuation, grammar.

Copyright: the right to create and distribute copies of a work. Under copyright law, the author holds a copyright to a work from the moment he/she creates it.

First rights: rights assigned to a publisher to publish a work for the first time.

Flat fee: a one time payment for a manuscript.

Galleys: pages of typeset text, not yet broken out into book pages.

ISBN: International Standard Book Number. This gives the book a unique identity for orders and distribution.

Imprint: a segment or line of a publisher with a distinct name, identity, and editors.

Mass market: books sold through retail outlets, usually appealing to a large audience.

Proofs: a book's typeset pages before it is printed.

Query letter: letter sent to a publisher/editor to ask if he/she is interested in seeing a manuscript.

Scene: a unit of action in a chapter. There may be two or three scenes per chapter or as little as one per chapter.

Slush pile: manuscripts a publisher receives from writers unknown to it. These may or may not be addressed to a specific editor.

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THIS EXCITING JOURNEY.

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EXACTLY HOW TO PUT YOU
ON THE PATH TO SUCCESS

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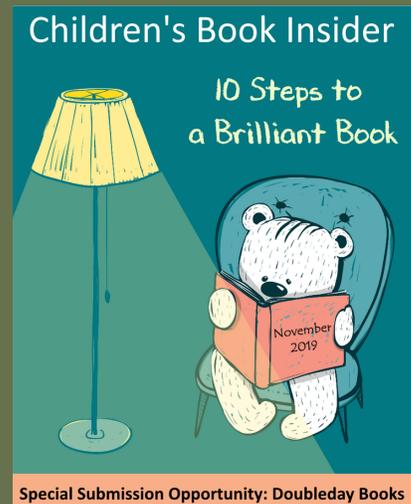
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Thanks for reading.

Now, go create something
wonderful!



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