

The Nuts and Bolts Guide to Writing Picture Books

Tools and Tips for Writing, Polishing and Selling Your Manuscript

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INTRODUCTION

I started writing children’s books when I was 35, two years after getting my master’s degree in Urban Planning and beginning what I thought would be my second career. As it happened, I wasn’t all that thrilled with my second career, and eventually found myself in the midst of a very lengthy application and interview process for a job I really wanted. *Really* wanted. When I opened the letter telling me where I ranked among the candidates—knowing only the top three moved on to the next round—my husband, Jack, stood by for moral support.

I was seventh.

I burst into tears and said, “All I ever wanted to do was write children’s books.”

This was news to both of us. First of all, I’d never expressed this desire before. Second, I hadn’t read a children’s book in ages, which was something of an oversight, as you’ll see later. Still, when Jack said, “Then do it,” I felt a huge sense of relief. At last I could stop being a professional imposter and do the work I was meant to do—even though I had no idea how to do it, which was another slight oversight, as it turns out. So, in an uncharacteristically impetuous move, I quit my job and started writing.

“I’ll give it three months,” I said. “If I don’t sell a book by then, I’ll look for another job.”

My expectations were, shall we say, a tad unrealistic.

But let’s begin with the *good* news.

Since that day some 18 years ago, I’ve sold nearly thirty picture books—rhyming, prose, poetry collections, nearly-wordless, and non-fiction—to Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, HarperCollins, Penguin Putnam, Chronicle, Simon & Schuster, and other major publishers. I’ve been lucky enough to work with many smart and creative editors, agents, and designers, and to be partnered with some of the most talented illustrators in the business: Jane Dyer, David Small, Nancy Carpenter, Christine Davenier, S.D. Schindler, Lauren Stringer, Tricia Tusa, Jeff Mack, and Christian Robinson, among others. My books have won awards, received starred reviews, have been translated into other languages, and included on the “Best of the Year” lists of *The New York Times*, *Parenting* and *Child* magazines, The New York Public Library, The Bank Street College of Education, and more.

Along the way, I’ve given presentations at conferences, taught multi-week classes, and conducted workshops on various aspects of writing picture books. I’ve led group critique sessions and provided numerous one-on-one manuscript consultations. I’ve done lots of readings and book signings, and have talked to small and large groups of kids—from toddlers to teens—at schools and libraries.

In addition, I've created a website, blogged a tiny bit, and become acquainted with (if not fully embraced) the social media world through LinkedIn, Facebook, Goodreads, Pinterest and others. I've made dear friends and become part of a far-flung community of multi-talented people—artists, writers, editors, agents, art directors, librarians, publicists, marketing experts, bloggers, and more—committed in various ways to one thing: getting good books into the hands of kids.

In other words, I've made a career of it, as I dreamed of doing when I quit my job all those years ago.

And now for the *not-so-good* news.

I didn't sell that first manuscript in the three months I'd allotted to the task. It took me quite a bit longer than that—about two years longer. During that time, I wrote a fair number of unpublishable manuscripts and racked up an impressive stack of rejections. It was painful and humbling, especially since I'd quit my full-time, decently-paying and sometimes-gratifying job to write children's books.

I cringe now looking back on my own ignorance. And yet, if I'd known how difficult it would be or how long it would take to get published, maybe I wouldn't have tried it. On the other hand, if I'd been a little better prepared, a little more informed, if I'd actually known something about writing and submitting picture books, I'm pretty sure I could have saved myself some time in the long slog toward publication.

Which brings me to why I've written this handbook. Over the years, many people have told me about a picture book manuscript they've written, started, or hope to write. Often, they're not sure what to do with it, and want some guidance. In addition, many students in my classes—as well as strangers who've found me through my website—have asked for writing advice or feedback on stories they've written.

The material in this handbook comes from responding to those sorts of requests, from teaching workshops and classes, critiquing scores of manuscripts, reading hundreds of picture books, and reflecting on the many mistakes I've made along the way. My intention is to provide writers with the practical, all-important, “nuts-and-bolts” stuff I wish I'd known when I was just starting out.

By the way, I have degrees in Economics and Urban Planning, *not* Writing or Children's Literature. I mention this because I hear people say, “I'd love to do that, but I'm not a writer,” or “I wasn't an English major.” It doesn't matter. If you're a creative person, you can write. And everyone's a creative person, even if we tend to forget that as we get older. So, if you're new to this, don't worry—no degrees or experience required!

What's in the Handbook

Each chapter is roughly equivalent to the material and exercises I might cover in a two hour class or workshop. The first eight chapters focus on the craft of writing picture books. Because *reading* picture books is so essential to *writing* them, I've always lugged a big bin of books to the workshops and classes I've taught, sharing parts or all of them to illustrate certain concepts. Since I can't do that here, I mention particular books and provide a few excerpts as examples.

At the end of each chapter I include a **Library List** of all the titles mentioned so that you can check out some or all of them on your own (feel free to buy them, too, of course). While I use many of my own books as examples—mostly because, in those cases, I actually know what the writer was thinking when the manuscript was written—I've tried to include a wide variety of picture books, authors and illustrators.

At the end of most chapters, I have a section called **Sharpening Your Tools**. Here, you'll find suggestions, exercises and writing prompts designed to reinforce the concepts in that chapter, stimulate creativity, and prompt story ideas. If you're like me, you may be inclined to skip over the exercises in "how to" guides. *Don't do it!* Well, okay, you can if you want to—but at least *read* the section first. I've used these or similar exercises in my classes, and am always impressed by the creative responses. I think you'll find them valuable (and fun). In addition, if you're already working on a manuscript, the **Polishing Your Work** sections offer ideas and suggestions to help develop your story further.

The last chapter focuses on the business side of things and, in particular, on developing a submission strategy for your work. As part of that strategy, I've included a **Pre-Submission Checklist**. Although I can't guarantee an editor will acquire your story, using the checklist will prevent you from submitting your manuscript before it's ready.

Throughout the guide, you'll find sections called **From the Desk of . . .**, featuring brief interviews with experts in the children's publishing industry—five editors, an agent, and a publicist. These are people I've worked (or work) with and admire, and they offer additional information, insights and tips for navigating the writing and publication process.

Finally, at the end of the handbook, I've compiled a **Resource and Reading List** (which I'll refer to as the "Resource List" going forward). In addition to websites, blogs and books about writing that I've found helpful over the years, you'll find lists of picture books grouped into various categories. So if you're looking for picture books with, say, a distinctive voice or a surprise ending, you can find examples here.

I know having a regularly scheduled class—and a deadline for assignments—helps many people make writing a higher priority than it otherwise might be in their hectic lives. Plus, it can make

the solitary business of writing considerably more fun. So if you have a writing friend or two, perhaps you can agree to meet weekly to go through these chapters together, do the exercises, and share your works-in-progress. Or not. Working alone is just fine too.

However you decide to use it, I hope you find this handbook helpful, informative, and encouraging. So grab your coffee (or beverage of choice), pull up a chair, and let's get started.

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