



How to Write for Today's Children

What kids will read and adults will buy!

By: Martine Hellyer

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About the Author

Martine Hellyer has written many stories for children of all ages.

She started writing as a hobby several years ago while working in an executive position with a large firm and kept her writing activities private while she was in that job by always using a series of pen names.

She found the writing more interesting than her main job and also a great stress reliever.

She believes that the benefits of writing, especially writing for children, are much more than just the money she has earned from it.

Martine has met many other writers with various levels of experience when attending conferences and workshops. That has led to some lasting friendships where she has exchanged letters, tapes, and emails.

She has been helped by many more experienced writers and her book is a pay back to the writing community for that help and the happiness which they have brought her.

Martine also believes that writing is a better way to maintain her mental agility than the crosswords and other puzzles which she also enjoys. Writing is also a way that almost anyone can use to earn money which is very handy in these economically stressed times.

Writers don’t need special training or a paper qualification. They just need to have an active imagination and a desire to entertain other people with their ideas and stories.

Martine says that her book is meant for anyone who wants to produce stories which are enjoyable and saleable as she has done for years.

Although she focuses on writing for children, there are many tips in her book which can help almost any writer to produce and gain more satisfaction and possibly sales from whatever type of writing they do.

Introduction

Writing for children has been a profitable sideline for me over several years.

I know of several people with no greater skills than me who are making a good living from this and other forms of writing.

The benefits of writing go beyond the financial. I feel that developing characters and stories has helped to improve my mental ability.

I have enjoyed reading the feedback about my books from parents, teachers, and children who have written to me through the publishers.

The feedback from readers of my stories is very valuable, even the suggestions about how I could do much better.

I have become friends with other writers and their emotional support and advice when I have struck problems with my own writing have been invaluable.

I hope that you will gain many tips and strategies from my book to help you along your road to literary success.

I believe that a lot of the information in my book can help writers, even if writing for children is not their field.

But, the most benefit will be to those who share my passion for writing stories which entertain children and their parents around the world.

Many people have the idea that writing for children is much easier than writing for adults.

Some see it as a good way to practice their writing until they feel they are good enough to write for adults.

But, the truth is that producing good stories which children want to read is not as easy as it may look.

As William Zinsser, the author and teacher, said: "Hard writing makes easy reading. Easy writing makes hard reading."

This book is intended to make the task easier and quicker by sharing my experiences and what I have learned from the many friends and colleagues I’ve found in children’s writing.

Are You Qualified?

One advantage of being an author is that no publisher or reader is interested in whether or not you studied writing or have a formal qualification.

You need to be able to write clearly and engage the reader so that they continue reading your story despite the many distractions which surround them.

This engagement with the reader comes from you developing and showing a genuine interest in people that you meet and interact with.

Whatever sort of stories you write; you need characters of all kinds to populate them.

Writing Course

You can do courses through the Internet, in community centers, and more formal courses with private and public organizations.

I have gained so much from taking some courses where the instructor is a successful writer that gives insights and techniques which I can use to improve my stories.

I have also learned from sharing experiences and tips with other students in the courses.

The instructor will usually will give you some feedback about your own work if it relates to the topic of the course and you specifically ask for it.

Be prepared for some which will not be to your liking. Keep a professional attitude and understand that it is offered constructively and focused on the writing you have done. It is not intended to question your ability to produce good work or against you as a person.

You can then apply the same critical standards to your other writing yourself.

All feedback from other writers can be helpful; and taking courses gives you the opportunity to share your enthusiasms and frustrations with people who also seek to be successful writers.

When you are asked to comment on another person’s writing, be honest but supportive. Try to find good points to focus on and avoid the negatives, if any.

Most people asking for criticism want you to help them be better writers and will welcome honest and helpful comments.

But, some will actually only want to hear endorsements of their own view of their work. You need to be very careful and considerate whenever you are asked to review someone’s work.

That is especially important when you will be commenting publicly as part of a group or panel or sending the comments in written form by letter or email. Tread very softly.

Research

Research is important for all writers and especially for those who write for children.

The first kind of research you need to do is when you are deciding what sort of story you want to write.

If this is your first story, it will probably be easier if you choose a subject which you have some enthusiasm and knowledge about.

You must check your facts about your characters’ hobbies, sports and other activities.

Even if you are writing a fantasy, you need to ensure that all of the verifiable facts and actions of your characters are accurate.

Children will accept almost any kind of fantastic idea but they will not accept mistakes. They will either lose interest in your story or bombard you (or your publisher) with letters of complaint.

You should gather more information about these topics than you use in your story. That helps to ensure that you don’t make any obvious slips which will show you up to your readers.

If you are writing about children of other countries or who lived in another time period, you need to be sure that you portray them, the conditions which they live in and all aspects of their World with reasonable accuracy.

Consult Experts

You can do a lot of this sort of research through books and on the internet. But, maybe you know or can contact somebody that has a special interest and deep knowledge in the topic.

As well as checking facts with them, you can also get a good idea of the way which people involved in that area talk about it; they will often use special terms for equipment and techniques which they understand and you will have to use to be accepted as one of them by your readers.

I have found talking with people that are seriously involved in various hobbies, occupations and sports have also been a great source of possible story ideas.

Learn about your Readers

Another important area to research is the potential readers of your stories.

The activities and interests which children are involved in today are much wider than many adults were able to enjoy during their childhood.

But, many of our interest still appeal to lots of children.

If you have children of your own or your work brings you into frequent contact with them, you might develop your characters from that basis but don’t make them clones of your own children – that’s likely to upset them.



You can get your children and those within your extended family to read and comment on your stories while you are developing them.

This can be useful but their close ties to you will limit the honesty and depth of that feedback.

You might ask your local librarian or teachers that you talk with during meetings at the school about the type of stories which are currently most popular with children in the age-group which you intend to write for.

Follow up by getting some of the books which they mention so that you can see how others are writing books for those children.

Finding Great Plots

Many writers have problems coming up with ideas and plots for their books while others waste a lot of time worrying about which of their ideas they should develop.

Once you start looking for ideas, you should never run short because they are everywhere around you.

For very young children, you should be able to list the sort of things which they are familiar with and see activities which they enjoy even if you don't have any small children yourself at this time.

You can also check in your local library and book shops to see the type of material which is being published and getting the best reaction from children and their parents.

If you want to write for older children, start with your local newspaper, which is a great source of ideas for almost every type of writing.

Look for stories or topics which involve or would interest the type of child that you want to write for. The original story which sparks your interest enough to add the topic to your list may not actually involve children at all.

It's important to consider what sort of story you feel most confident and comfortable in writing.

Do you want to write for boys or girls or perhaps involve both in your story?

After all, girls are just as interested as boys in subjects like sports, animals and many others. Over recent years many activities that have been generally thought of as "for boys only", have been taken up very successfully by girls as well.

You can find more ideas when talking with friends about their children or children that they work with.

There are probably many possible plot ideas which you can gain from memories of your own childhood.

What sort of hobbies, pets and other interests did you have when you were about the age of the children that you now want to write for?

What about the interests which your friends had?

What were your greatest fears?

Although many of their activities and interests are different to what you and your friends enjoyed, the children who will read your stories will have the same sort of fears and frustrations.

Helping them to explore and deal with them in story form can be an extra positive benefit in addition to the excitement and humor you fill the story with.

Involving and dealing with your fears is likely to make your writing about the situation more authentic than something which you can only imagine. That will make it more real and personal for your reader, whether they’re a child or someone reviewing your book for possible publication.

What were the best things about the friendships which you had?

What were the difficulties that caused problems between you and your friends?

Children probably still have similar frustrations and problems making and keeping friends. You can help them by showing how friends help each other and respect any differences in background, appearance, beliefs or interests which they have.

Never just use a story to tell them what they should do.

How did you fill in your time?

What sort of trips did you and your family take?

You can also get the basis of a plot from children that you see or interact with in your daily life.

If you keep in mind how you felt and acted when you were about your reader’s age, you can probably develop ideas from events and activities

which occur in most of our lives at some time and which could be based on an event when you were an adult.

This might include:

- The loss of a pet.
- The quest to get a pet.
- A visit or stay in a hospital.
- A trip to another area or even another country.

There is no reason to avoid sad events in a book or even as the main theme of one. They are part of every child’s life and some parents welcome and will buy a book that reflects a situation them and their children experience or might have in their future.

A friend told me yesterday that her young daughter asked to have a kitten. The mother had reservations, mainly because she worked through most days and the child was at school as well as heavily involved with sports and other activities.

But, she found a book about a kitten which was brought into a new home but then had to spend most of every day alone. This mother felt that this book helped her with the difficult task of explaining one of the main reasons that she could not allow them to adopt one – it would not be fair to the cat.

I have found ideas for possible stories when I’ve seen something on television or elsewhere about a frog jumping championship, a state fair, someone lost in a forest, an escaping hot air balloon, a lost dog that was found alive three years later, a dinosaur bone unearthed from a local quarry. (What if it had been a dinosaur egg!).

The original story is only a jumping off point which you can embellish from your own imagination in a way that you believe will appeal to your readers and also, of course, to publishers.

From there, you develop your main character and decide how the topic in the story will link to them.

Now you start asking yourself questions about the character: Their family, friends, lifestyle, the town they live in, what sort of problem which you will introduce into their lives and how they will resolve it through the course of the book.

You also must work out how this problem will affect the people around them and other parts of their daily lives.

You need to involve other characters, both adults and children. But, remember always that the resolution of the problem must be the result of actions by the children if your story is to appeal to readers of the same age.

Many stories can involve putting the main character in a situation of location which they not familiar or comfortable with. Have you spent some time somewhere that would take effort for a child that was used to a different situation to adjust?

I've been in a department store for a special event after most of it had been closed for the night. I have often thought of using that location as the basis for a story but you are welcome to it if it appeals to you?

That illustrates another important point. I don't mind sharing ideas which I have not used.

They are not worth anything until me, or someone else like you, takes action and makes something from them.

Types of Children’s Books

It's commonly accepted that most children's books are getting shorter. The main exceptions are from popular authors with a proven sales record.

The length of the book will have to comply with those which the publisher of the book uses.



All picture books are set out on some multiple of 4 pages. Most are 32 pages but may be shorter. The text alone may only be 500 words for the simplest books which focus on easily recognizable

illustrations of common objects and creatures with 1200 words or more in books which have easy to follow plots.

A book for beginning readers of about 5 to 8 years of age, sometimes called an "Easy Reader", may have up to four thousand words or as few as one thousand.

The next type is called “Early Chapter” books. The text is presented in Chapters and there will be no sub-plots which might confuse the reader at this stage of their development.

Like the picture books, these books have illustrations every couple of pages which help to keep the reader’s interest. Keep your sentences short and description to a minimum (that’s the job of the illustrations).

Some children in this age group don’t like reading and publishers offer some Early Chapter books called “reluctant readers” with more action and pictures which can encourage these children to read.

Many Early Chapter books are offered in series with the same main characters continuing through from book to book. This can mean more books for you to write where you don’t have to put in as much time in producing new characters.

The next broad type has up to 40,000 words and you will use some sub-plots to make the story more interesting and the problems for your main characters more challenging.

These books have few, if any, illustrations and are usually read by children from 8 to 12 years old.



Teenage and Young Adult fiction can be longer; and have more involved plots and relationships, and include subjects which are regarded as too strong for fiction aimed at younger children.

You can have characters that have to cope with alcohol, drugs, sexual assault and other subjects which are part of the world which many of these children are familiar with.

Your writing must be as powerful as the subject matter.

The best way for you to decide the approximate length for the type of book which you are writing may be to look at recent books in your library or favorite bookshop to see what is currently being published.

You can also check the publishers’ listings in the various annual guides or on their own web sites or trade listings.

Remember that books which are currently published might have been commissioned about twelve months before the book was released.

The publisher may have less or more restrictive requirements when you are ready to submit your book.

Your book will be considered on its merit, not the presence or absence of strong topics.

Topics and Taboos

Children are exposed to many unpleasant things in real life which are not suitable for inclusion in their light reading.

But, what publishers believe is generally acceptable changes over time. They usually base their views on sales figures and market research. So, what they might consider could trail the opinion of people that you mix with by some months or years. After all, they risk large sums of money on every book which they publish.

They may feel the public is ready for something more controversial, publish one or two titles and then revert to their previous opinions and policies if sales are low or there is strong opposition from the public or interest groups.

The late teen/young adult fiction area explores subjects and includes behavior which is part of the readers’ life experience, either directly or among the people they know and mix with.

Avoiding those subjects could restrict the appeal of a story to a small part of the market.

Books for young boys may contain material about body functions and excretions which was totally unacceptable for publication in the past.

Authors can choose to include these subjects in their books or not.

Including or excluding them won’t decide whether the books might be published. The basic test will be whether the story is well told and has obvious appeal to the potential readers. There are other important factors which I will explain in another Chapter.

But, I suggest that you avoid sensitive areas with your first couple of books. I’m not trying to restrict your options, but I believe that including provocative material will probably reduce the possibility of a publisher accepting your first couple of books unless they are truly exceptional.

When you have a good track record, your provocative material will have a better chance of acceptance and promotion.

Producing Your Book

You can write your draft of your book in any way which suits you, but you need to supply it as a computer file, usually in Microsoft Word® document format, to a publisher because they will not give any consideration to a hand-written submission.

But, the computer you are using to read this ebook will probably be sufficient to produce acceptable submissions.

If you do not have Microsoft Word®, which is the standard format used for book submissions, you don’t need to buy the Microsoft Office® suite to produce copies of your book in that format.

There is a powerful and free alternative called Open Office which you can download from <http://www.openoffice.org>. You can use that suite of programs to prepare your book and save the file in Word’s .doc format.

There are versions of Open Office for all common computer systems.

Setting your Story

It’s probably easier to use a location which you, or your potential readers, are familiar with when writing your first story, but you can choose any setting you want.

Children’s books have been set almost everywhere in the known universe and far beyond it.

Wherever you set your story, you must have the details correct.

If you are writing fantasy or science fiction and set it in a totally imaginary place, draw a map so that your characters do not walk fifty miles at a single step.

If the pull of gravity is half that of Earth, make sure that its effect on all characters is similar.

Most children will not like having to read paragraphs about the location, climate and other background – they want action!

You also need to keep descriptive text to a minimum because of the tight limits on children’s books, especially for the younger ones.

This means editing your book carefully, but that’s usually a good thing anyway.

Your descriptions of both characters and locations will be enhanced by the illustrations. The rest will be created by your young readers’ imaginations.

The Heart of Your Story

Every great story has some sort of problem or disagreement at its center.

If everyone is happy all the time, it would be pleasant but boring – and you must avoid boring your reader at all costs.

Before you start writing the story, write out a short description of the main character, their goal and what major obstacle they must overcome to achieve it.

Except in the early readers and picture books, there will probably be minor problems which will surface near the end of each Chapter and be faced and overcome in the following Chapter.

Of course, not every problem will be solved so neatly. Some will not be resolved until near the end of the book.

The final hurdle should be the most pressing and the one which gives the main character their biggest test before their triumph which leaves your readers with a positive feeling about themselves and your book when they finish reading it.

The positive outcome should always seem in doubt until the last few pages.

If everything seems to come too easily to your hero, the reader will not feel they have got value for their money or their time and they will avoid any future stories of yours which they are offered.

If, however, your characters, situations and the way you tell your story involve their emotions, they will look for more stories from you and recommend them to their friends.

Editing Your Book

I believe that professional editors are worth every cent that they charge.

But, most writers can edit their own work to a reasonable standard.

One thing which will help your self-editing is to read several of the same type of book as you wrote including some which were published by the publisher that you will submit your book to.

When you have written your book, article or story, I suggest that you put it aside for a day or two before you try to review and edit it. Some tutors advise that you put it away for a week or even longer but I believe that anyone who has a professional attitude and a desire to produce the best work that they can will be able to detach themselves sufficiently from their book after a couple of days so that they can start the final phase before they submit it to the publisher.

My first step would be to check the book against the basic requirements which the publisher lists in the Writers’ Guides or on their website or information sheet.

The length, format, and presentation should be a good match.

My next step is to print a copy and then read the whole book aloud. This can show up errors which you might not find if you just read it silently. I am not sure why this technique works so well, but I think reading silently uses a mental image which was partly created while you were writing the book.

When you read it aloud, you focus better on what is actually on the page and, in my experience; most errors will seem to jump out at you.

Tips

Keep Adults in their Place

We know that most adults are also often restricted by rules and other pressures but most children believe that adults enjoy a powerful and privileged position without the level of restrictions and commitments which they have.

When they are reading for enjoyment, they want to focus on characters about their own age that strive for great goals and achieve them, despite many difficulties and through their own efforts and ingenuity.

Try to keep the adult characters in your stories in the background and give the work and the rewards to the children who earn them.

They are the focus of your readers, so they must be the focus of your book.

Keep in Touch

Even when you are writing a fantasy or about children that live in another time or place, it is very important to emphasize points of similarity in the activities and the thoughts and emotions of those children with your readers.

If there are no points of contact, the level of bonding between them will be much less.

Apart from physical similarities, the emotional concerns of both groups of children will probably have some similarities. Stresses like sibling rivalry, restrictions on what they are allowed to do, being accepted by groups their own age and responding to peer pressure are some of the things which continue to affect children’s happiness and achievements like they have done for centuries.

Choosing your Point of View

One of the first decisions you must make when you write your book is to choose the point of view which you will use to tell your story.

Many writers choose to tell the story in the first person, with the main character telling the story.

“I started to climb the staircase, trying to avoid any creak from the stairs.”

This lets the main character share their feelings, thoughts and ideas with the reader in a very personal way. That can help the reader to identify and feel sympathy for the character and the problems.

But, it also limits what the writer can disclose to the reader. If the main character isn't involved in something or it doesn't know something which is happening, this cannot be disclosed to the reader.

You will have to weave any description of what the main character looks like into the action of the story, because it would be out of place for them to describe their own appearance, especially when they are involved in a lot of action and dealing with the challenges which face them.

This can allow the reader more freedom to assemble their own mental image of the character, but the writer has to find some way to give them some details to help form that image.

The emotions and ideas of the other characters can only be disclosed to the reader through conversations between the characters, unless your main character can read their minds.

You might provide information about them by having your central character read a letter which has the information or through some other device. It is a significant limitation or, at least, a challenge for you to overcome.

In adult fiction, the story is often told from the point of view of a friend or close associate of the main character, such as Sherlock Holmes’ Dr Watson.

But, the usual practice with fiction for children is to tell the story from the point of view of the main character so that the reader is always in the center of the action.

Another popular choice is to tell the story from the third person point of view.

“Barry picked up the amulet and pointed his torch at it.”

This gives you two options. I have used each of them for different stories.

1. You can tell the story in the third person but stay focused on the main character through the book. The main reason for keeping the focus on the main character is to reduce the possibility of the reader becoming confused.
2. You can choose to move the story forward while focusing on the actions of various characters at different times through the book. This gives you the ability to describe incidents and actions which the main character is not aware of. This also makes it easier to explore their motivations and show more about them as individuals.

The second choice is perhaps the easier way to be able to describe your story.

But, switching the focus from one character to another can easily lead to confusion in your readers’ minds.

It can also be more difficult for you, until you gain some experience, to keep everything in order. So, I suggest that you only use the viewpoints of two characters and stick with a single person or creature through each Chapter.

If you vary the viewpoint between two or more characters at different times through the book, it can become more difficult for the readers to build a bond between the reader and the main character.

That is an important consideration with children’s books because so many are written with a desire to make them into a series. This is likely to produce greater benefits for both the writer and the publisher than just producing books with different characters in each one.

If the reader likes and bonds with your hero or heroine, they are likely to want to read your later books which feature the same characters.

You must try to keep the right to produce any future books about your characters when you are negotiating for the sale of the first book about those characters.

My suggestion is that you write your first book either from the point of view of your main character or that you use the third person point of view while staying focused on the main character through the book.

As you gain experience and a good reputation with your publisher and readers, you can experiment. But, you need to build that bond first.

This can help you and your young readers to stay focused. If you identify with your hero or heroine to some extent, then this viewpoint will also help you to keep their reactions and viewpoint consistent through the book.

The only place where multiple viewpoints are common is with fiction for teens and young adults. The readers are unlikely to be confused by switching views on the action because they are already comfortably multitasking with their electronic devices.

Show and Tell

One of the most important techniques which a writer must use is to involve the reader by showing how a character feels than instead of just giving the reader a bland statement of their condition.

For instance, “Freddy has a cold.” is a statement of fact which cannot engage your reader’s emotions like you could by describing Freddy’s appearance and actions:

“Freddy held his handkerchief to his nose as another huge sneeze exploded.”

If someone is scared, they might shiver, their eyes might widen and sweat might drip from their forehead. Descriptive text which reflects the way the reader feels when they are scared, suffering from a cold or whatever will help them to identify better with the character in your story much more than a bland statement like, “Jane was frightened more than she had ever been in her life”.

When you understand and can describe the effects on your characters in their voice and actions, you make it easier for your readers to understand and bond with them.

If you cannot make your reader care about your characters, they will not care about finishing your story to find out what happens.

Hooking Your Reader

Hooking your reader is not just important, it’s vital.

Imagine for a moment that your book has been published and is proudly displayed in your local bookshop.

Someone is attracted by the cover and the creative title.

They pick up your book and quickly browse through the blurb inside the front cover and then turn to read the first few lines of page one.

What will you put there which will make them keep reading and prevent them from dropping your book back on the shelf?

You need to grab that reader like a fisherman hooking a fish and keep their interest so that they want to keep turning the pages. If they feel the money and time they invest in your book, you have a customer and an unpaid but very enthusiastic sales person.

Before the start of your story has a chance to engage the interest of that browser in the bookshop, your first few paragraphs must jolt (in a pleasant way) the person who reviews it when it arrives unannounced at the publisher’s office.

That person ploughs zealously, but with little hope, through ever larger stacks of unsolicited manuscripts.

Most publishers estimate that they will find less than one in a hundred that will pass this first stern test and move on up to someone that will give it a more careful examination.

If you want to be in that one percent, you’ve got to always provide the best work that you can!

At that point, your words have to make an impact without the benefit of a brilliant cover or any other marketing tactic.

You have just a few seconds and a few lines to hook them.

You are competing with hundreds of other new books for the eyes and dollars of those readers.

Putting Your Story Together

I always prepare an outline of the whole story before I write it.

I want to know where I need to end up and the important points which I must touch on the journey.

Some people feel this is restrictive and devalues their creativity and inspiration. But, my experience is that using a broad outline and a story board let me focus on the creative aspects of my storytelling while knowing that I am unlikely to veer too far off course.

That saves me stress and valuable time. Whether you earn your living from your writing or you have a job as well, using an outline helps you to make the best use of your writing time.

You must start your book with your main character in the center of some action and build from there.

If you were writing for adults, you might be able to start with some intriguing description of their appearance and their surroundings but, when you are writing for children, you start with a bang.

This is why you should put a reasonable amount of time in to writing several different beginnings and polishing the one which seems the most promising until it is the very best which you can think of.

This is how top copywriters develop advertisements for major campaigns. They invest a lot of their time in writing and comparing hundreds of beginnings for each advertisement because they know that if the reader is not hooked by that, then they will never read any of the rest of their carefully crafted words and another sale is lost.

However, when you are working on your first book, I suggest that you don’t spend too much time at the beginning trying to get the “perfect’ opening.

You might become another of those sad “almost authors” who have a book, or even several, in their cupboard – none of them ever completed or submitted because the writer could not find the perfect beginning and never reached the end of any of them.

Maybe you could write, say, three and choose the one which you think has the most pulling power.

Write it down. Then, continue your story.

Through the course of the book, you will have some mini-climaxes, with each one at a slightly higher level of excitement as the story develops!

You should include some quieter times where the friends discuss their adventures and plan their next step while their opponents plot to frustrate them.

But, keep these sections as short as possible- children are used to constant action, instant gratification and will quickly become bored – that’s an end to your story which you want to avoid at all costs.

You have to give your readers any necessary description and background information in very small pieces, while mostly focusing on action, excitement and always moving the story forward.

The Best Kind of Ending

Your job is not done until you have drawn the reader on through the book to the exciting conclusion.

The best kind of conclusion for a children’s book is exciting, upbeat and, as far as possible, a surprise.

Many stories which we see are very predictable right through to the ending. They are like sausages, they fill you up but don’t excite you and you know what you’ll get if you buy another one – something almost exactly the same.

If you can surprise your readers with an unexpected but satisfying ending which you provided clues about through the story, then you will probably get many readers who will start to look forward to more stories from you.

When you have reached the end of your story, you should ensure that you resolve any problems or disagreements which your characters found on the way there.

Children, like most adults, like to be in control and they feel unsettled when there are loose ends which are still dangling at the end of a story.

But, do it in as few pages as possible and don’t linger once the pace has slowed. Leave them smiling and eager to begin reading your next story.

Three Ways to Connect with your Readers

How do we connect with the readers who are likely to be from a variety of backgrounds and have different reasons for reading our books?

If you read the popular science stories in your newspaper and magazines for research or just entertainment, you probably have been told that there are three kinds of people:

- 1)** Those who best absorb information which they can see.
- 2)** Those who are more attuned to information they hear.
- 3)** Those who are naturally focused on what they feel.

This suggests to me that we should include words and phrases which appeal to each of three senses in our stories.

If you are describing a storm, you could mention the lightening (visual), the thunder or the rain hitting the iron roof of the old house (aural) and the feel of the cool raindrops on your face (touch).

Use description sparingly and don’t try to include all three types for every incident unless it fits naturally and does not slow your story down.

Developing Characters

The people in your books are the most important ingredient. Even if they live in a different time or place to your readers, like a space station on Mars or a villa in ancient Rome, they must share some characteristics with your reader which will help them to become involved in your story.

Even fantastic characters like a talking horse or a space-hopping, intelligent creature which you develop entirely from your imagination must have some characteristics which draw your readers to them emotionally.

The characters must fit the story you want to tell and have some appeal to the readers.

The main human character will probably be a slightly idealized version of your typical reader.

Usually, a book for, say, 8 to 10 year olds will have a main character who is about 10 years old; at the upper end of the targeted age range.

Remember that the characters must control the plot, not the other way round.

To maintain their attraction for the readers, the characters’ qualities, thoughts and actions must cause the positive outcome at the end of the book.

You have to know more about your character than you will probably reveal to your reader.

It is your characters’ emotions which will engage the reader and get them to care about the characters and what happens to them.

Your character must be fully rounded, just as if they lived next door to you or were even part of your family.

You need to know their family situation, the football team they support, how they fill in their time, any infirmities or special talents which they have and what they want to do in their next holidays.

You also need to be aware of their fears, regrets and dreams.

You can have as many characters and situations as you can fit into the story when you write for older children.

But, with any story, you must take care that your reader, of any age, is able to follow what character they are reading about.

It’s best to keep the characters in books for younger children to a minimum, even just one or two.

That makes it easier for them to follow and enjoy the story.

Let Your Characters Speak for Themselves

Everything that your characters say and how they say it is very important to the appeal of your story.

It is also useful for giving the reader important background information without slowing the story down.

When you read other people’s children’s books as part of your research, you may not notice right away that the characters talk in an abbreviated version of how we talk to each other in real life.

That’s because we have to keep the story moving, even when the characters are just chatting on the phone or while walking through the local park.

When characters talk in simple books for very young readers, you must do everything possible to make it easy for your readers to follow who is saying what.

Include the character’s name in the paragraph with each sentence and tie the words to some action they are doing.

For older readers, you don’t have to include the name of the character with each sentence.

You should separate what each character says into new paragraphs. Who is speaking can be implied to some degree by the way that they talk.

Another way to indicate who is speaking is to include them doing something in the same paragraph.

Each character’s actions should be in the same paragraphs as what they say. Don’t put Harry’s wand-waving in the same paragraph as something which Myrtle says.

You don’t want all your characters to be talking in exactly the same way. That would be confusing and also boring. It would also be out of character.

Your characters speech should show the way they are speaking without you having to use words like “murmured” or “shouted” very often.

Stick with “said” most of the time and use more descriptive tags occasionally, like a spice, where they will be most effective.

A test of good dialog is to just read the spoken words themselves and see if you can tell who is speaking and what the dialog reveals about their feelings and different viewpoints.

Tag the first few exchanges and then use the speech tags less frequently. This will help your story to flow more smoothly but use enough tags, or insert an action or thought every so often, to ensure that your reader will be able to follow who is saying each line.

All dialogs must be included in quotation marks. If one character has several lines of dialog, split it up into separate paragraphs, each containing one main thought and put quotes around each paragraph.

Keeping Track

You will need to use some method of recording the details of your characters, their inter-relationships and their movements.

Does Robert have neat, brown hair on page 6 and curly red hair on page 105?

Did you call him Rodney on page 16?

Your readers will notice and be turned off by such elementary slips.

You might use a storyboard like those used for laying out the scenes of a movie or a play. This will help to ensure that your heroine does not get on a bus in Manchester and then step off a plane in Los Angeles on the next page. In Hollywood they call it “continuity”. I also call it insurance.

You need to put together a fact sheet about each character, real or imaginary, which appears in your book with all the details which might be relevant so that you avoid making any errors and ensure that your characters’ attitudes and actions seem consistent to the readers.

On your reference sheet, you should flesh out your characters in more detail than you may ever include in the book. Knowing them in depth helps you to be consistent when describing their actions and attitudes.

Some information that might be useful for guiding what they do and say in your book includes their name (including that middle name which they don’t even tell their friends), age, hobbies, dreams, fears etcetera.

You could draw a sketch of each character. They don’t have to be good because nobody else will ever see them. They just have to help you remember what they look like and the sort of clothes and accessories which they wear.

You could clip pictures of people from magazines and newspapers which you buy to use for your characters.

These pictures might also help you to generate ideas for more stories too.

Submitting Your Book

Submitting your book and getting it accepted and published by the first company which you submit it to is possible, but unlikely.

The first step when submitting your book should be to find a compatible publisher.

Look for children’s books which are focused on the same general area as yours and check the publishers’ details inside them. Then, check the publisher’s web site or the information about them in one of the Writer’s Guides which you will find at your bookshop or local library.

Your teen novel will not impress a publisher that specializes in picture books for very young children, no matter how well it is written.

That may seem to be an exaggerated example. But, inexperienced authors make that sort of error every day because they send their work to a publisher without checking what type of book that publisher actually wants!

You should then focus on the impression that your submission will make on the first level reader at the publishing company.

Make their task as easy as possible by presenting your book in a professional manner.

Print the book on 20 pound paper, single-sided.

Use a standard font, either 12 or 14 point. Set your margins at about 1 inch on all sides, double space the text for easy readability and do not justify it.

Put your full contact details at the top left of the first page.

The top right can have the title, page number and word count (not required).

Put the title, sub-title if you have one, and your name or pen-name in the center of the first page.

The only other thing I would put on that page is information about where your book or parts of it have been published before.

Each page must have your name, the book title and the page number.

Do not staple or bind the pages. If the publisher has any interest, extra photocopies will be made for circulation within the company and binding of any kind will get in the way.

Include a cover letter but keep it brief and to the point. Only include information which is relevant to the publisher and can help them to decide whether your book should be published.

You can include a list of your writing credits if they are for commercial or highly regarded publications. Mentioning your occasional essays in the newsletter for your budgerigar breeders’ club newsletter is unlikely to impress a publisher unless your book is a handbook about breeding budgerigars.

Include a short summary of the plot, main characters and significant events in your book. Keep this to two or three pages.

Include a self addressed envelope with sufficient postage to ensure the return of your submission or it is unlikely to be returned. If publishers paid return postage on all the unsuccessful submission they get which don’t have return postage included, they would be out of pocket for a significant sum.

If you want to save the cost of postage for the return of your book, ask the publisher to discard it if they are not interested and include a business-size, stamped envelope for their reply.

Some “clever” writers stick a couple of pages together or reverse them toward the middle of their book so they can check if the reviewer read their book.

But, as I’ve explained, most submissions will only be read to the point where the reader is able to make a judgement about its suitability for that publisher’s list. They have the experience to be able to judge most books from the first few pages.

This emphasises the value of spending time to prepare the opening scene to get their interest.

You can guard against some of the common reasons for rejection by carefully checking the publisher’s requirements which are listed in the Writers’ Guides that I have listed.

If a publisher offers guidelines for submitting material to them on their website or by email, get a copy. They can give a valuable insight into the points which you should keep in mind when submitting any type of book to that or any other publisher.

Always contact the publisher and get the name and contact address for the editor that reviews books of the type which you have written.

When you address it to a particular person in the organization, it will probably go straight to that section and not be consigned to the anonymous piles in the mailroom from which few books ever become best-sellers.

Proposals

When you have published some books, you might submit a Proposal with, say, three chapters and an outline of the full story instead of the full manuscript.

An unpublished author should submit the full manuscript unless the publisher states otherwise in their guidelines.

This might get an expression of interest but is unlikely to score a commitment because the publisher will not want to make that until the whole book is in front of them.

They need to know that you can complete the whole book and that it will all be of a high standard.

One thing which you might include in your cover letter is an idea for writing another book with the same characters. If the publisher is interested in your story and likes the way you wrote it, they may be encouraged by the possibility that you could produce a follow-up if the first is successful.

That could mean that their investment in the first book, if it is successful, could create a ready-made audience for the second.

Waiting for the Publisher’s Response

Unless you have a track record or are the Managing Director’s brother-in-law, you could be waiting up to a year to get a decision about your submission.

It’s a good idea to wait at least a couple of months before sending a polite enquiry to the publisher. Even though all publishers probably use the latest electronic equipment and programs, you may get the impression that your book is with a publisher.

But, unsolicited submissions are a low priority. That’s mainly because of the low rate of finding quality books among the piles.

Many publishers will not look at unsolicited submissions.

Dealing with Rejection

You should be prepared to suffer rejection and not let one, or even twenty, put you off your quest to become a published, successful writer.

A British literary agent said that many of her most successful clients told her that they used the sting of early rejections as a spur to drive themselves to improve their work and gain greater satisfaction from their later successes; an example of the old saying, “success is the best revenge”!

Every published writer has had their work rejected.

Madeleine L’Engle had about 25 rejections before her book, “A Wrinkle in Time” was accepted and published in 1962. She received the Newbery Medal for it the following year and it was a strong seller for years afterwards. Then, it was adapted for television early this century.

Dr. Seuss was reported to have weathered more than 25 rejections.

J. K. Rowling’s first Harry Potter book was sent to at least a dozen publishers and rejected by all of them. Number 13 was lucky for J. K. Rowling, the publisher and millions of children and adults that have enjoyed the books.

Please don’t think that you won’t see any rejections after your first one or two books have been published.

Unless the previous one is very successful, each new book will not be guaranteed publication.

Most authors get rejections from time to time. It probably continues to sting but you’ll realize that it’s just a bump, not anything that need worry you for long.

TIP: There are two kinds of rejections which you might get.

The first is the common, unglamorous and unhelpful form letter with something like, “Does not fit our current requirements. Best wishes for your future success.”

The second is the fairly rare and highly prized rejection with helpful and/or motivating comments.

Take the advice given seriously and file the letter away carefully. You may take that as a confirmation that someone outside of your family and friends sees something in your writing which is worth some mild encouragement.

Now, you just have to prove them right.

There are many reasons for a book being rejected apart from a lack of quality, original content. They include:

The publisher has no interest in books on your subject.

They have enough books about that theme among the titles they keep in print (their backlist).

They have a book with a similar focus in active preparation.

The language, style or other content does not conform to their standards or guidelines.

They have spent all their money on acquiring the latest book ghosted for a television celebrity.

The book is too long, too old-fashioned, too short or too modern.

Dealing with rejection is not always easy.

But, remember that they are not rejecting you, just the book. I realize that most writers become very attached to their writing. So, it may feel like they are rejecting your “child” or a part of yourself.

The best way to deal with the disappointment is to have another, equally interesting project under way as soon as you have posted the first one off to the potential publisher.

Always try to list more than one publisher that you will submit your book too. I usually send mine to one publisher and then send a fresh copy to the next on that list if I am rejected by the first one. I suggest that the good impression that a freshly printed copy of your book will make on the second publisher, rather than recycling the slightly dented copy you sent to the first publisher is good business practice and worth the extra cost.

For anyone who says that I should re-use the first copy, my question is, “Which would you prefer to get, if you were deciding whether to invest hundreds or thousands of dollars in my books?”

I recycle all of the scrap paper, including rejected manuscripts, but feel I would be making a bad impression on the publisher if I sent them a dented and possibly stained copy.

Commercial, Vanity or Self-publishing

Commercial publishing marks you as a “real author” in many people’s minds but there is alternative ways to put your books in front of the public.

You can publish your book yourself.

This is neither an easy nor a cheap option but there are some (relatively few) confirmed stories of authors whose books were rejected by regular publishers, published their books themselves and became hugely successful.

The authors whose names are used to promote the benefits of self-publishing are usually exceptional individuals with strong self-belief, good health and good marketing skills.

The most famous of these is probably Beatrix Potter. She was a skilled amateur artist and also an amateur naturalist who caught and tamed rabbits and other small creatures.

She paid for 750 copies of her book, ‘The Tale of Peter Rabbit’. From that investment which was about eleven pounds, eventually grew sales of enough books for Beatrix and her husband to live very comfortably and bequeath many acres of woodland to the National Trust. Sales of the book exceed 45 million copies world-wide.

Vanity and P.O.D. services do not release figures for the number of copies of each book sold because they only prepare and print them. But, sales of 100 copies would probably be regarded as good by many of their clients.

The exceptions are those with drive, funds and marketing skills who promote their books and themselves as well as any mainstream publisher.

Self-publishing can involve getting your books printed by a regular printer, a Vanity publisher or a Print-on-Demand service.

Another option is for you to publish the book in electronic form and sell it from your own web site on the Internet or through online bookshops in electronic or printed form. The printed copies are produced by whichever Print-on-Demand service you pay to do it.

Using a Regular Printer

This can be fairly expensive and you need to ensure that the printer has the equipment and experience to produce books to the standard which you expect.

They will require a certain number to be printed and for the bill to be paid promptly, possibly with a substantial deposit on placing the order and the balance when the books are collected.

You have full responsibility for transport, storage, promotion, distribution and sales. That can be the equivalent of a full-time job with no pay until you start getting firm sales.

If you are able to get copies of your book into bookstores, they will almost certainly be on a sale-or-return basis. You will not be paid until you confirm that the bookshop has actually sold some copies.

Most will insist that you accept their receipts as the official record which means they don’t pay for any which are stolen or just go missing from the bookshop.

Most authors look for a publisher with the right equipment who specializes in producing books in short runs. These books can still cost you as much as the full retail for a similar sized book from your local bookshop because you are dealing in very small quantities.

So, you might find it difficult to sell many copies but they make a nice, unique present!

Vanity publishers and Print-on-Demand services have similarities in the equipment which they use and some of the services which they provide.

Vanity Publishers

Vanity publishers advertise in magazines for poets, writers as well as some general interest magazines.

They provide a service, usually in the form of a package which include editing, book design and printing of a specified number of copies.

The price is usually fairly high and the quality varies with the different publishers.

To me, they are a service provider. They do not provide the same services as a real publisher. They charge for each service and they provide no promotion or marketing unless you also pay for that.

The only promotion which some provide is the appearance of some of the best books they print in their own brochures and advertisements to promote their own services.

Print-on-Demand Services

Print-on-Demand services usually focus on providing their services to people that want to sell their own books themselves.

They will print one or a hundred copies at a time and some will distribute the books for a fee to the author’s customers.

They do not provide marketing services.

Some authors produce and sell their own books through these systems and, despite the relatively high cost per copy, make money. But, I think that even the services would admit that relatively few of their customers get to the stage of living from their writing and P.O.D. sales.

Publishing Your Book Online

This can be a fairly cheap way to put your book in front of a potential world-wide readership in the millions.

You need a computer system like the one which you are reading this ebook on, a connection to the internet, your own website and a way to handle credit card sales.

You also need some basic training to set up your own web site, produce the book in downloadable PDF format, load it to your website and promote your book to potential customers.

Setting up your own Website

Have you thought about setting up your own web site?

You may think that is too hard, time-consuming or too expensive.

There are easy ways that you can get started and most writers can benefit from the exposure which the Internet provides.

You can produce a simple web site with a free computer program such as Web Plus SE from <http://www.freeserifsoftware.com/>

This is any easy way to produce a colourful web site but it is not suitable for using with e-commerce.

That company offer a newer version of the program from the same page but I suggest that you just get the free version and set up your site.

When you have a little experience, you will be in a better position to choose a more powerful program from the hundreds available.

But, you may decide that you don’t need anything more powerful. You can continue using the free program for years if that is sufficient for what you want.

Here are some important suggestions about your web site.

Do not disclose any highly personal information about yourself, your family or anyone else.

There are legal requirements regarding handling private information about visitors and very strict ones which must be followed when dealing with children.

I am not a lawyer and cannot advise you about this area.

You should consult a lawyer who s experienced in this area for any professional advice.

You need to check the information provided by your government on its websites.

I have put a couple of relevant links below here but your use of the material is entirely at your own risk.

OECD Privacy Statement Generator

http://www.oecd.org/document/39/0,3343,en_2649_34255_28863_271_1_1_1_1,00.html

“How to Construct Your Privacy Policy” on the Direct marketing Association site,

<http://www.dmaresponsibility.org/PPG/>

DMA Children's Privacy Policy Generator

<http://www.the-dma.org/privacy/childrensppg.shtml>

The above sites have good reputations but be careful about using material which you find on the Internet.

Do not copy any material, such as privacy policies, text, pictures or anything else from any web site without specific written permission.

Be aware that some people may offer you free pictures or other material which they do not have the right to give you or to let you use on your web site or elsewhere.

Martine’s Message

I hope that the information which I’ve included in this book for you will help you to achieve your writing goals; whether they are to make money or just to earn some extra cash and express your own ideas for other people’s enjoyment.



You can share your knowledge and ideas while you help children you may never meet to face difficulties they encounter with more confidence.

I hope that I have shown you how rewarding that writing for children can be.

I have not tried to disguise the fact that it can be hard work too.

I hope that you have already started to try some of these ideas yourself or, at least, think about how you will use them.

Remember, that ideas and techniques are worth nothing until someone like you uses them to reach their goals.

Martine Hellyer 2009

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