



TIPS FOR WRITING A SUCCESSFUL PICTURE BOOK

by Dawn Lesley Stewart

Do not let the apparent simplicity of a picture book fool you into thinking it is easy to write one. Picture books for children are a balance of text and illustration that in combination create the whole story. Write concisely, and let the artwork act as the adjectives and adverbs. Here are some ideas of how to make your words appeal to both editors and children.

TYPES OF PICTURE BOOKS

Consider whether the book is prose, rhyme, concept book or a specialty book. A combination of book styles might work for your manuscript. For instance, *Harriet's Horrible Hair Day* combines prose within the concept of a counting book. Consider these types of books when plotting: alphabet book, concept book (ex: shapes, textures), counting book, novelty book (ex: pop-up book, lift-the-flap book), poetry, prose.

POETRY vs. PROSE

As a rule, it is easier to sell prose than it is to market a poetry book. If writing in rhyme (or poetic form), make sure the poetry is exceptional. The average length of a picture book is 32 pages. Write no more than 1,500 words for a picture book manuscript, with fewer than 100 words on any one page. And consider that some editors think manuscripts that are over 500 words are too long. Remember, the more words used, the less room for artwork.

KEEP THE STORY FLOWING

Characters in a picture book story are not described in detail. The illustrator conveys description via art. For instance, in *Harriet's Horrible Hair Day*, nowhere is the color of Harriet's hair mentioned, nor are any of the characters described. Also notice that the story flows so the scenery in each illustration is different, maintaining viewer interest. The story moves from the outside yard into the house. Events within the story bring each illustration to life with a variety of action. Remember, the artist needs a diversity of either scenery or action (or both) to create lively illustrations.

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ALLITERATION

Use alliteration in the title (example: *Harriet's Horrible Hair Day*) or in the text. Alliteration creates a humorous cadence. It's attention-getting as well as an excellent method of exploring sounds.

3 WORDS OR 3 PHRASES

Repeat three words or phrases in the story to add rhythm and word play. A classic example of this is from *The Three Little Pigs*: "I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house down." Notice that children will soon repeat the words or phrases, anticipating when the next repeated line will occur.

TRANSITION

Encourage the reader to turn pages. One page-turning enticement is to use ellipsis (three dots . . .). Partially write a sentence, use the dots, and finish the sentence on the following page. Combine the ellipsis with transition words such as and . . . then . . . but. Another flip-the-page enticement is the cliffhanger, which adds suspense. End the page with something that has the reader asking, "What happens next?" Yet another page-turning lure is to pose a question at the end of the page. To find the answer, the reader must continue reading the book.

There are many writing techniques available to help capture reader attention. You may not want to use all of these in the same story (use sparingly for greater effect), but a few of these techniques will add fun to the tale and make the story flow. Invite the reader into your story and keep them there.

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Books by Dawn Lesley Stewart

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[300-Plus Quilting Tips, Tricks & Techniques](#)

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