

The Way Forward

A booklet produced in support of a seminar for new writers held in 2014

Written by
Christine Dale

INTRODUCTION

Writing for children has tended to be seen by the literary world as the ‘lesser’ genre. But if you think about it, it’s far more demanding. You have nowhere to hide in a children’s book.

Writing for children is unique in that the finished product must go through 4 stages before it reaches the end user – and then it must still be relevant and have appeal to the child. Adult books don’t need to meet this high standard.

A reader does not read in order to then get meaning; a reader brings meaning to and gains meaning whilst reading. In other words, comprehension is part of the act of reading and not an exercise that follows. Margaret Mooney –
Developing Life-long Readers Department of Education

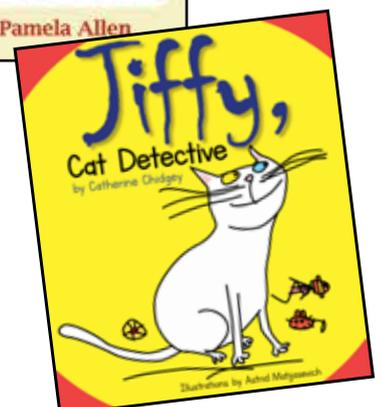
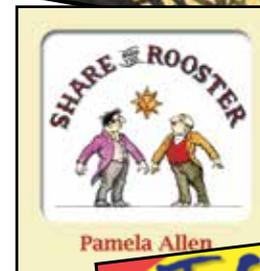
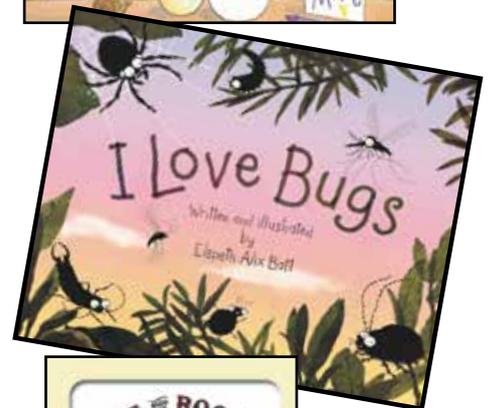
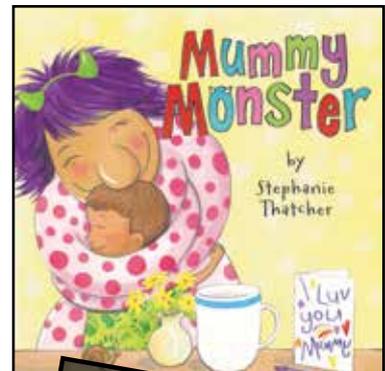
PICTURE BOOKS

In the days of Janet and John educators chose to ensure that the images depicted were not accurate to the text because they didn’t want the children to ‘guess’ what the text was. They wanted them to LEARN TO READ. This back-to-front approach went against the learning structure children had been following since birth. Until this obstacle children would: observe, then mimic, then initiate, then practice what they’d learnt. They did this when learning to walk, they did this when learning to speak, they did this when learning to interact in every way with others. Trying, making mistakes, trying again were all part of the process.

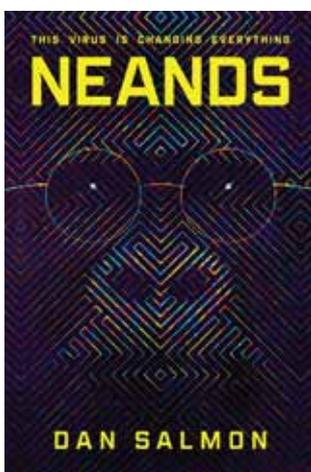
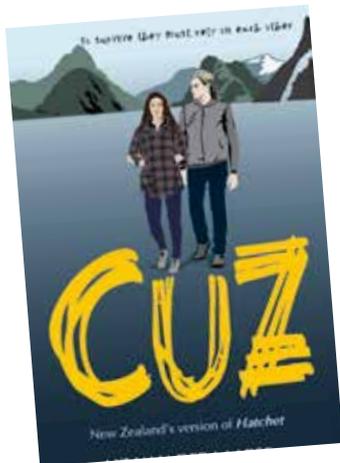
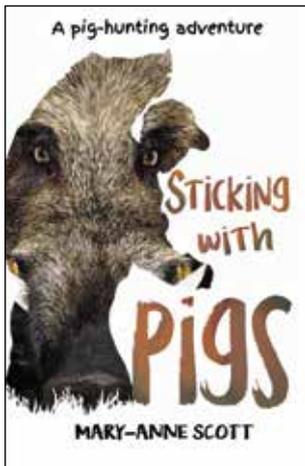
However, with reading the quicker the child sees themselves as a reader the great chance there is of making them a life-long lover of reading. So giving as many clues as possible aids in the chances of success and increases the love of story. When a child succeeds with deciphering a story they will return to it and success means they see themselves as readers.

“To foster a love of reading must be at the heart of every story. It is through the ability to read that all education flows.”

Christine Dale - Writing for Children



So much of children's literature is about enforced fun or enforced morality. Surely you will be rewarded if you behave this way, or "Aren't you having a wonderful time reading about this?" and you never are and it never goes that way so part of 'A series of unfortunate events' was an acknowledgement of the bewildering state of affair that is childhood. Daniel Handler (Lemony Snicket)



NOVELS

For generations society has been prescriptive with regards what is and what isn't suitable for children to read. At the novel level (usually regarded as ages 8 to 14) there is a wish to avoid subjects such as bullying, racism, abusing drugs and/or alcohol, or any reference to sex. There have been some who have dared to touch on these topics e.g. William Taylor in *The Blue Lawn*, Markus Zusak in *Fighting Ruben Wolf*, Maurice Gee with *The Fat Man*, but on the whole such material was seen as not suitable for children. This aversion to taboo topics however, can, in some parts of the world, include all references to magic, wizardry or beliefs that don't depict Western Christianity. Any references to death are also to be avoided.

An aversion to fantasy was at its height when Joanne Rowling was trying to find a publisher for her first book in 1995. She was consistently turned down because of the subject matter and because she was up front about the fact that she wanted a commitment to the six stories she planned to follow. Eventually Barry Cunningham (then editor at Bloomsbury) signed her but the initial print run was very small, just 500 hardcover copies for the UK market of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. It was word of mouth that turned this first book into the success we know today. Readers drove it, with the help of Librarians. 10 years ago it was science fiction that was no longer in fashion.

So be prepared to be turned down with a blanket statement that says the market is no longer interested in the genre you are working in. Being able to outlast these obstacles, not be beaten by rejection and continue to promote your story comes from knowing that you have written something you believe in – that it is the best you can do – and that you have tested it has real appeal to your audience.

Remember that the market doesn't know what it wants until it sees it.

Remember the original children's stories collected by the Grimms brothers were long, bloody, and designed to teach valuable lessons – all things that would be no, nos today.

WHAT A PUBLISHER IS LOOKING FOR

The publishing industry is like all business in that it is always looking for the next big thing while aiming to limit their risk. They have a bottom line and profits to consider. This means they tend to judge any new proposal against what is either succeeding in the market now or what they know to have succeeded in the past. As a first time writer your aim should be to offer something fresh, while ensuring you tick as many 'yes' boxes as possible and avoiding as many 'no' boxes as you can.

So what are some of the things they look for?

- That the story length and content (including language) suits the level the work is written for.
- That there is a story, no matter how short the text.
- That the tale is unique, even if a retelling.
- That there is clear audience appeal.
- That the finished package can be produced effectively, for sale at an attractive price.
- That you, the author, are committed to the project and prepared to aid in its promotion.

WHAT A BOOKSELLER IS LOOKING FOR

In the past I could assure you that all booksellers know what their market wants and that they are, therefore, a rich source of inspiration and information when deciding whether you are on target with your topic and format. However, these days the two main chains (Whitcoulls and PaperPlus) don't choose their staff for their book knowledge so I wouldn't recommend you try asking them for advice. The independent booksellers, though, are a rich source of information.

That said please don't ask any of the independent booksellers to read your manuscript. They are approached all the time and it does put them in an awkward position, after all you are a prospective client and they don't wish to offend a client. They are also extremely busy people who would much prefer to assess a finished book so they can judge the whole package rather than just a manuscript. There

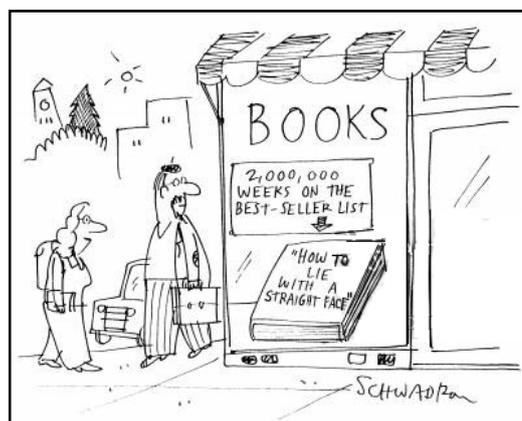
would be no harm in discussing what is popular, what works well in the genre you're interested in and any new trends etc. Most will happily chat about books and take you on a tour of their shelves but be prepared to leave with a few purchases as well as information.

So what are Booksellers looking for?

- That the story length and content (including language) suits the level the work is written for.
- That there is a story, no matter how short the text.
- That the tale is unique, even if a retelling.
- That there is clear audience appeal.
- That the finished book is packaged well and is clearly value for money.
- As you can see there is a lot of cross over here.

So if you can satisfy these needs there is no reason why the next big thing can't be your title, whether that be through an existing publisher or as a self published project.

Now for the even more important section... the end user.



WHAT IS THE BUYER LOOKING FOR?

The purchaser may also be the reader but at the picture book level it is more likely to be the caregiver or grandparent. They may well, however, know the end user/reader – their likes and dislikes, or they will be selecting material based on:

- The message – the story says something they would like the reader to learn or know.
- The age – the topic and presentation is assumed to be right for the age group.
- The topic – the child is not being introduced to information they deem inappropriate.

So the buyer will be looking for the following:

- That the story (length, content and language) suits the audience the work is written for.
- That there is a story, no matter how short the text.
- That the core of the story is relevant to the age.
- That the tale is unique, even if a retelling.
- That the content is certain to appeal to the reader.
- That the finished book is clearly value for money.

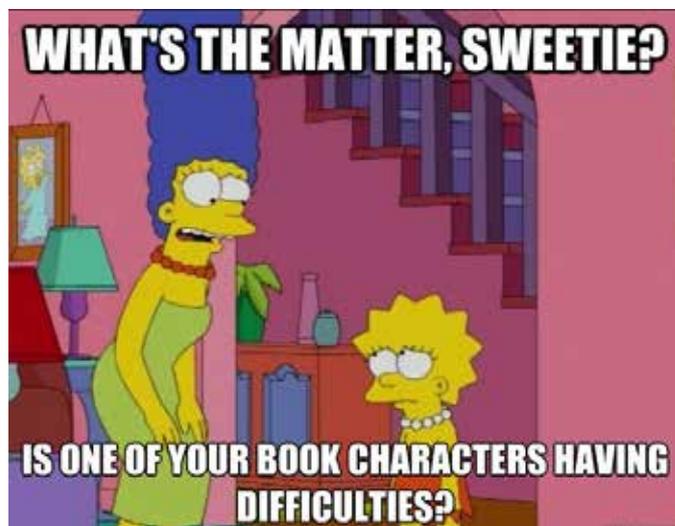
Again, you'll see there are a number of similarities.

Remember a child can only remember tasks or things proportional to their age minus 2. So a 3-year -old remembers 1 thing. Younger than that they remember nothing! It's part of why repeated reading at bedtime is so successful ... and so helpful.

Add to this what we have learned about children and their enjoyment of books. Children no matter what their age, differ from adults in that they do not have a filter system. They are open and honest about what they like and don't like. They won't tolerate works that are:

- Obviously written for their 'own good' rather than for honest entertainment.
- Inclined to waffle on and not stay true to the point.
- Written from fiction rather than about fiction.
- Badly researched, miss informed, obviously biased or 'boring'.

Today's children are easily distracted and their attention spans are getting less and less with the increase of digital media. You can complain about it as a fault or you can recognise it and use it to effect. The writer's job (and it has always been the writer's job) is to grab the reader within the first chapter, preferably within the first page.



WHAT A READER IS LOOKING FOR

The book buyer will be looking for books that they know the reader will enjoy, but they may also be looking for topics that will ‘teach’ the child something they themselves believe in.

Be wary. The best way of teaching anything, from morals to maths, is to make it entertaining so aim to be entertaining first and teach second. Adults will be able to see areas of interest developing in children even as young as 2. Over the years I’ve notice some topics that come up time and time again and they tend to follow an age progression. I’ve noted some here for future reference, but remember every child is an individual and tastes do vary. You wouldn’t say all adults are interested in one specific topic, and children are just young, inexperienced versions of their older selves.

Here is my rough guide. It’s not gospel so don’t quote me.



AGE	INTEREST AND FORMATS	POSSIBLE TOPICS AND CONCERNS
0-2	Colour and shapes and sound	Looking at things, hearing things, focussing on their world as much as possible.
0-5	Family, relationships, their known world and experience, Highly illustrated books.	Telling the truth, getting into trouble, being brave, learning lessons - ABC, 123, colours, sounds etc. structured stories that are easily predictable. Bedtime, good behaviour etc. Beginning of humour at 4.
5-7	Same as earlier but add in the world and looking outside the family and nonfiction. Formats are mainly picture book but the first novellas are introduced around now too. Humour is strong here – especially toilet humour and this carries on through to 16, especially for boys.	Non Fiction: Dinosaurs and big machines become fascinating here. Codes and magic come in near the upper end and that includes Egyptology and the study of ancient cultures. Plus joke books! Fiction: Fairies and fantasy worlds begin at 6-ish, magic carpets and traditional tales from many cultures.
6-10	The need for adventure in fiction goes alongside a growing interest in nonfiction. Formats should now look like ‘real books’ i.e. novels, with lengths of 48 pages up.	The reader still likes the occasional illustration in support of the text at this age (Photographs in nonfiction). Fiction is a little more adventurous as we see the start of junior novel formats and titles in series e.g. Geronimo Stilton, Dinosaur Rescue, Dragon Knight.
10-12	This age group is wanting to read about people older than themselves, their trials and tribulations. They want to identify with the hero or heroine and learn through their experiences.	Now the readers want to test the world and the safest way to do this is through fictional tales. Stories that are puzzle based are also very popular, e.g. whodunnits and adventurous tales. Also nonfiction stories about people who have succeeded in some way, e.g. bravery, explorers, etc. Humour remains strong of course.
12-16	Surviving in the world. How others have survived. Friendship, dating, etc. Much prefer reading about older children than themselves – definitely not younger than them.	The full gamut of topics including Science Fiction, Horror, Fantasy, Myths. Nonfiction with more difficult topics such as war machines, diseases (e.g. The Horrible Histories series and the like). One image per chapter is still enjoyed but not essential.
16-adult	These readers wouldn’t be seen dead reading a kids book. Must be full adult book format now. These are more challenging readers that require thought. I highly recommend these stories for adult holiday reading. They’re usually plot strong and totally engrossing.	Girls – friendship/relationships, boys – pure adventure, but there are crossovers where the stories are strong. e.g. John Marsden’s series Tomorrow When the War Began. Vince Ford and Fleur Beale hold their own in this area and into the previous age group. Endings don’t have to be quite so cut and dry, some of the conclusions can be left to the reader. Authenticity is essential here. These readers are knowledgeable and can spot ‘bullshit’ a mile off.

Universal is the central character succeeds - without the help of adults.

THE READER

We all love stories. Even as an adult I love having a story told to me. Often these stories are jokes, now that I'm an adult and it is well known that humour is the best way to impart a tale. Readers of all ages love jokes.

If you have something you wish to impart then I strongly recommend you first make it entertaining. In answer to the question *What is a reader looking for?* It's fun, every time.

That said, story is also the place where children can get experience SAFELY. Within a book a child can experience life, fear, love, and sorrow, all while safely tucked up in familiar surroundings. Through the exploits of the characters they get to see what happens if..

All this 'business' is a lot to take in but just remember



Reading isn't a solitary activity. It's a time of continual connections: with the characters, with aspects of the reader's life that the story evokes. Reading makes sense of things; it helps give shape and meaning to the world. Julian Barnes puts it perfectly: "Life says, this happens. Books say, this happens because ..." David Hill, NZ Herald 18 June 2013



'The market doesn't know what it wants until it sees it.' And it just might be the story you are writing.

Also, tastes change. What was acceptable in the era of The Grimms Brothers would be totally unacceptable, too bloody and violent, for today's market. Shoving a character in to an oven or cutting off feet were all perfectly acceptable in those old traditional tales.

Just make sure that your story is about, for and attractive to CHILDREN.

Harry Potter, when finally accepted for publication, had a hardcover print run of 500 copies. It was children that drove the return to print and ultimate success.

INTRODUCTION TO SELF ASSESSMENT

So you've been inspired and you've written your story. You may have spent many hours on it but the reality is that only now does the real work of a writer begins – the assessment/rewriting stage. An assessment is a conversation with your writer self. Good writing can be said to be essentially about self-assessment. An author's work is the end result of many rounds of revision based on self-assessment of earlier drafts. Learning how to do this without also loosing the will to live is an essential skill to ones development as a writer.

Writers must learn to assess and evaluate their own work objectively, as well as their writing process, in order to make continual improvements and develop as a writer. They must also develop their own voice and writing process, a process that is nurtured by the reflective exercise of self-assessment.

The first step is to distance yourself from your new work. You can do this by putting it away for several weeks or even months. Then bring it back out and read it through in total. If it is a picture book I recommend you read it out loud. Take you time and pay attention.

Only once you have been through this process should you seek assessment elsewhere. I am a great believer in the support and inspiration one can get from being part of a writers group. Many of the writers that have gone on to be launched have spoken of their thanks to the other members of their writing group. But for a writing group to be truly beneficial requires a level of honesty and openness from the members. However, I have met

groups that are hugely supportive and encourage their members but avoid giving any critical comment, worried that this will undermine their fellow writers. I recognise that it is difficult to tell someone they need to make changes, but not telling them gives little chance of improvement and isn't giving them the support they need to progress.

That said, it is important that members of a writing group make it clear what they wish to achieve from joining. Are they wanting to share their work with a supportive group of people or are they aspiring to be a published writer so looking for an honest critique that will encourage them to improve.

If the later then here are some ideas on how to tell if your story (or the one you are assessing for another writer) is ticking all the boxes and also how to be both supportive and honest in your assessment.

SOURCES OF ASSESSMENT

Yourself First

Writer's Groups

Manuscript Assessors

Publishers

Family and Friends

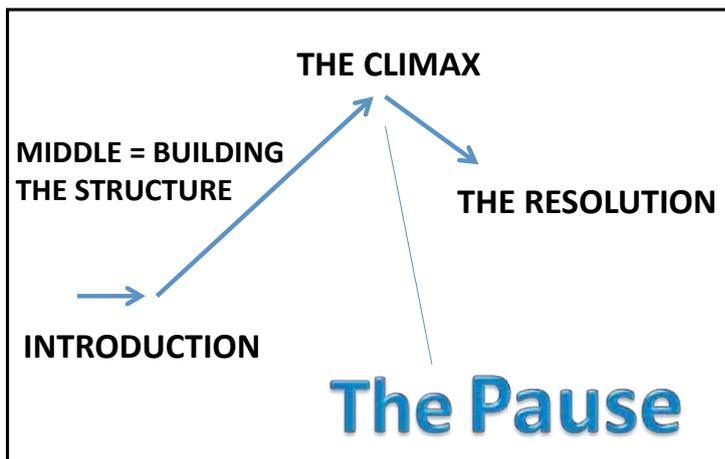
Are you assessing a story or a report?

There is a difference between the description of an event and construction of a story. A story needs the following:

1. A beginning, a middle and an end

Often I find one of these missing, rarely the beginning but often a suitably strong ending, and even more often a considered middle. That said the beginning (or introduction) can be where a writer doesn't immediately capture the reader.

Remember you have the maximum of one chapter to get their attention, in the case of a novel, one page would be better though. A picture book has just one page.



The middle is when we find out **what the problem is** - the one this story is actually about.

The end is the climax and release. In *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* the climax is when he eats 10 things in one day and gets a tummy ache.

Here the pacing of the story pauses and changes direction. The caterpillar builds a home and then... the story ends in the revealing of the results of all his eating. Note the pause. It is essential that the reader get the point... that here is the moment of change.

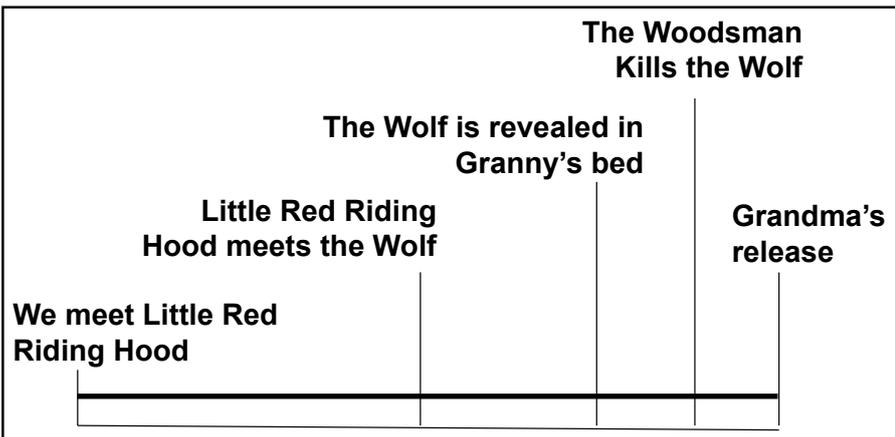
In a novel there needs to be more than one climax, each building a tension and release. In fact some titles have one per chapter but they in turn build in strength towards the main climax of the story.



On Saturday he ate through
one piece of chocolate cake,
one ice cream cone, one pickle,
one slice of Swiss cheese,
one slice of salami,
one lollipop, one piece of cherry pie, one sausage,
one cupcake and one slice of watermelon.

That night he had a stomach-ache!

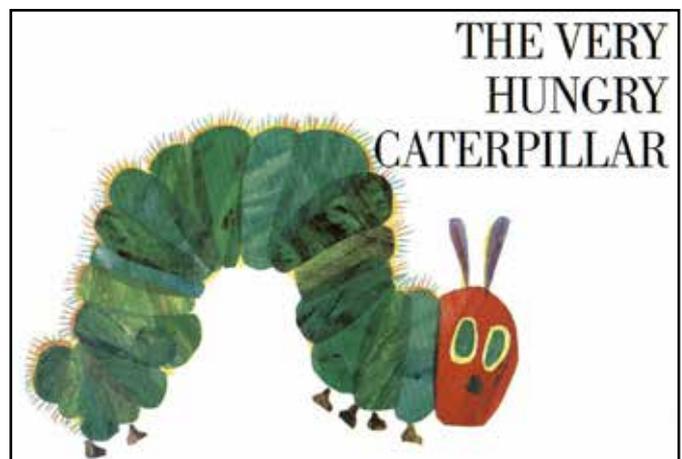




This is the moment when everything changes, the moment that moves us to the resolution. Here is what a building climax might look like for the traditional story of *Little Red Riding Hood*. Today such stories are often presented as picture books but remember the original of this story was quite long so there was plenty of time to build several peaks in the tension.

2. A problem

All successful stories have an issue that needs solving, whether that be a character needing to get somewhere or someone having to learn to accept themselves, the possibilities are endless. Even the 500 – 1000 words of a picture book requires a problem. Consider *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* – a classic picture book with very few words but a clear problem that is stated in the title. Are you able to clearly define what the problem is in your story?



3. Character

We need to be able to see, identify, have feelings for, a character or characters in the story. The main character needs to be someone we, the reader, cares about. Consider such characters as Madeleine, Harry Potter, or Hairy Maclary. In these people and animals we see elements of ourselves or characteristics we admire. Remember though, that the most interesting of characters are often the most flawed. Ones that are struggling with something, a fear, a love, a difficult task or responsibility that weighs heavily on them.

Sometimes the environment itself can be seen as a character. E.g. the dark and dangerous moors of *The Hounds of the Baskervilles*, the mysterious Hogwarts school in the Harry Potter series, or the isolation of the house in *Jane Eyre*. While I often ask writers to delete extraneous description, if there is an element in the environment of the story that will help to explain how the characters act then give it as much space in your story as you do the other characters.



4. Consistency of Time and Place

The first issue - grammar.

I find a common fault is slipping between past and present tense without realising it.

Often a story will start in the past tense, as you establish the background (e.g. Once upon a time there was).

In this traditional structure we stay in the past tense until we reach the beginning of this story (e.g. One day things changed). Now we remain in the present until the story is resolved. How can you tell? Here is a quick clue:

Past tense, the general rule is to add 'ed' at the end of the verb, but this does not apply to all verbs.

Future tenses, the verb is accompanied by the words 'will' or 'shall'.

I find a common fault is slipping between past and present tense.

EXAMPLES

“We had eaten (past perfect tense) dinner, and then we talked (simple past tense)”

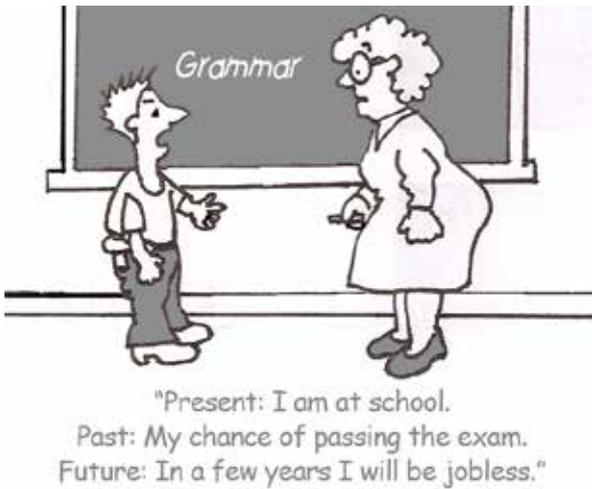
This should be written as

“We ate (simple past tense) dinner, and then we talked (simple past tense)”.

You can see a full run-down of the English verb tenses at:

www.oxforddictionaries.com/words/verbs#verb_tenses

PAST
Introduction
PRESENT
The story
FUTURE
Prediction



Time slip stories move backward and forward in time but I caution against jumping around in time in a children's book (at the junior level and below anyway). It is just too difficult to follow when you are learning to read.

The following table is a quick guide for future reference.

Present simple tense	Past simple tense	Present participle	Past participle	Present continuous (progressive) tense	Past continuous (progressive tense)
I sit	I sat	sitting	sat	I am (or I'm) sitting	I was sitting
I stand	I stood	standing	stood	I am (or I'm) standing	I was standing
I jump	I jumped	jumping	jumped	I am (or I'm) jumping	I was jumping

(Taken from <http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2012/10/continuous-tenses/>)

This can be very confusing and you don't need to know all of the above in order to write successfully (though an editor may argue that point) but here is a quick guide so you can check what is happening with the tense in your story:

To the right is the exercise you were given and asked to rewrite into one tense. I've left space for you to rewrite.

The men were sat in a circle around the fire that will blaze bright in the dark room.

Jacob and Elisa had been warned by their parents on numerous occasions never to venture into the Amber Woods after dark or risk some vague and unspoken fate once within the trees, so they didn't and just played in their front yards instead.

— Bulwer Lynton, *How Not To Write*



- **Pacing**

This goes hand in hand with the climax because it is pacing that allows the reader to pause and appreciate the climax. Often there is an issue where a climax is skipped over and the strength of that moment is overlooked. I sometimes find it is because the writer hasn't recognised the possibility of that moment, that their focus was elsewhere.

- **Plot**

Make sure your story has all the elements of a plot, including what the story is actually about. Think of the plot as rather like telling a joke, especially with a picture book which has restrictions on the number of words you can use.

For example:



The set up:	Three physicists are travelling in a hot-air balloon and suddenly realize that they're lost.
The content:	They shout down to a guy in the meadow, "Where are we?"
The punch line:	The guy thinks for a bit and then replies, "You're in a hot-air balloon."

Now you could stop there, or continue your story by building a lead in to a new punch line.

Next set up:	One physicist says to the other, "Well, he's definitely a mathematician." "Why do you say that?" "Well first of all, he took a while to think up a response. Second of all, his answer is logical..."
New punch line:	"Third of all, it's completely useless."

- **Relevance**

That the action and characters resonate with its intended audience. E.g., that the language being used in the dialogue is appropriate to the character. This refers to a shy character being hesitant or a bold character being loud and brash, but also it refers to the language of the time the story is set in, e.g. a character living in medieval times would not use expressions such as 'gee whizz' or 'right on.' Here are a couple of examples which clearly show that the use of speech patterns and slang can clearly situate dialogue in a specific country or era

Dialogue from *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen

'You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least'

Dialogue from *Holes* by Louis Sachar

"Well, let me tell you something, Caveman. You are here on account of one person. If it wasn't for that person, you wouldn't be here digging holes in the hot sun. You know who that person is?"

"My no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather."

HOW TO GIVE FEEDBACK

Read the work through completely. If you are doing this on your own work then this exercise can be done throughout your writing process, starting each new writing session by rereading all you have written so far. Listen to yourself as a reader.

Pay attention to your thoughts and emotions as you read the text. How are you reacting? Try to capture why you're having that reaction.

Dos and Don'ts

It is not only what you say but 'how' you say it. Here is a list of things to consider when it comes to giving feedback.

- Don't give criticism unless asked.
- Don't listen to any critique if you haven't asked for it.
- Do Avoid emotional/judgemental words, e.g.: not 'woolly' but rather 'unclear'; not 'crazy' but 'chaotic'.
- Do be clear with yourself about what you want, e.g.: If you only want to hear what another likes about your work, ask for that.
- Do try to avoid back-and-forth arguments. If you find yourself beginning to defend your critique or the writer you are critiquing is defending his or her work, then stop.
- Do take your time. Critiquing takes time – give it that time, read the work well, make notes.
- Do be sure the critiquing is actionable, e.g. "Have you considered having your main character changing as a result of the events in chapter 3?"
- Do always refer to the writing not the writer. E.g.: "In this paragraph I like the way that the writing..." rather than "you wrote in this paragraph that..."

A well considered, constructive criticism should aim to leave the writer excited about the work.

HOW TO STRUCTURE A CRITIQUE:

1. Begin with the good: what succeeded, what worked. Then comment on what you believe needs further thought. Finally end with a general positive statement. This is called the sandwich technique.
2. Make solid, clear suggestions for improvement. Don't be vague. Ensure your suggestions are actionable, i.e. able to be put into action.
3. Make positive suggestions; e.g.
 - *Greater interest could be created in the introduction of the main character if there was a comment here.*
 - *This reaction could be stronger, to make the main character more sympathetic.*
4. Use positive language and be gentle. E.g. if you feel there is little about the plot that works, or that you've read the concept before, try asking questions of the writer: "I'm intrigued by this idea. Have you come across something similar? Where did you get your inspiration?"
5. Curiosity can help. E.g., "I felt X at this part. Is that what you wanted to create?"

A BRIEF FRAMEWORK FOR CRITIQUING FICTION

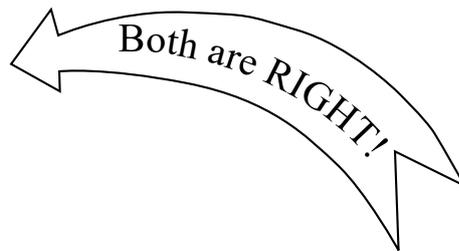
1. Plot Does the story begin quickly enough?
 - Is there a middle (to start solving the 'problem')?
 - Is there a clear ending (resolution)?
2. Character Do the characters live and breathe?
 - Do you have feelings about them?
 - Are they changed by the event/s?
 - If not what would make a difference?
3. Pace Where does the climax come in the story?
 - Could you make a change that would improve the story?
 - Novels: is there sufficient variation to create interest?
4. Story What is the story about (its theme)? Can you tell?
 - What have you learnt?
5. Target Is the story aimed at the appropriate age?

In addition, with picture books add:

6. Word count
 - Can you justify the existence of each word?
 - What does the word bring?
 - What does the word add?

KNOWING YOUR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Are you plot driven or character driven?



*Writing From the Heart:
How to Write for Children*
- Joy Cowley.
www.storylines.org.nz

Joy Cowley says that all writers tend to be either plot driven or character driven. Neither is wrong, it's more like being left-handed or right-handed. The trick is to work out which you are and then make sure you address the weaker side of your writing style.

Plot Driven

If you are plot driven then you will be inclined to rollick along with the action and miss fleshing out the characters. Why is this an issue? Well having an exciting story is great but if you don't get to know the characters who are being affected by the action then you don't care what happens to them, and if you don't care then the plot and resolution are likely to be diffused and weak.

The best way to address this is to spend the time writing small biographies on each of the main characters. Give them back stories, likes and dislikes, fears and joys, plus a full descriptions of what they look like.

These bios aren't going to be included in your story but having spent the time on them you will be able to visualise each character clearly as they move through your plot and you will know how they will react in any given situation.

When the character is called on to act or react you will know what this particular character will do or say, how they'll say it, and what they'll look like doing it. The flesh and blood of the character will seep into your story without you even

realising it. Here is an example of my bio for Red Riding Hood.

Little Red Riding Hood – A 10 year-old girl who lives with her solo mother. Her Granny gave her a red cape for her last birthday and she loves it so much she wears it all the time, so her mother starting calling her Red Riding Hood. She is a little short for her age but really hopes she will grow tall, like her mother, in time. Being short she tends to be a little louder and pushier than her friends. She believes in justice, doing the right thing, and standing up against bullies.

Character Driven

If you are driven by character you may be incline to meander through the action, staying in the mind of one or other character too long and not grabbing your reader fast enough or moving them on quickly enough. Readers do need information sufficient to know where they are in space and time in any given situation, they also need the tempo to pick up and slow down in order to remain interesting.

The best way to address this is to plot a graph that is broken up into either chapters or events so you can clearly see how quickly the action is moving.

ASSESSING YOUR OWN WORK

Put the work away.

I strongly recommend that your first action after completing your manuscript is to put it away for a period of time. This can be weeks or months, it depends how long you need to get some distance from your work.

You will have been living with this manuscript for some time so you are invested in it. However, now you need to be critical so you need to be standing at a distance to see it clearly so put it away.

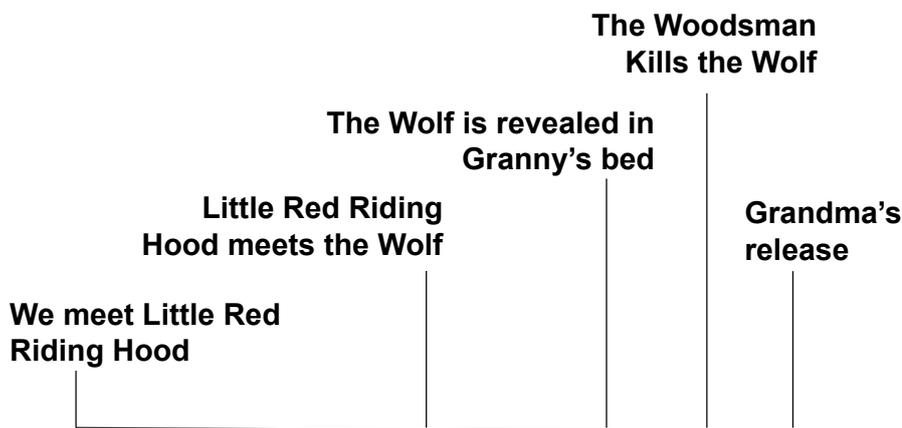
When you are ready to see it as **someone else's work** then reread it again.

ASSESSING SOMEONE ELSE'S WORK

Here are some elements to consider as you read.

- Is your reaction to the content obviously counter to the intended concept of the story. Note where the divergent is happening and come up with some suggestions that might remedy the issues raised. Make these suggestions actionable.

Draw a timeline



- If there is confusion with regards where you are at any given time ask the question and suggest something that might clarify your confusion.
- Is there something that is blocking your ability to enjoy the story? State the issue and suggest something that you would find helpful, e.g. I am not clear who this character is, could one of the other characters introduce him in some way?
- If you're not relating to the character, then ask yourself why not and include both your confusion and why you are confused rather than just say 'I don't like this person'.

- If you are having to re-read because you get lost in time or space, then suggest specific, clear, constructive changes to address your concerns.

- Ask the question 'What is your motivation in writing the story?' Is the answer clear.
- Is the problem resolved?

- ✓ Take your time.
- ✓ Pay attention to your thoughts and emotions as you read.
- ✓ Are you relating to the character(s)?
- ✓ Are you following the action or are you having to reread?
- ✓ Note /address any concerns before moving on.

WORKING WITH A MANUSCRIPT ASSESSOR

Getting the professional assistance of a Manuscript Assessor will give you all the guidance and constructive criticism you need. I can't recommend it highly enough. However, it is an expense so use the service sparingly and only once you have gone through the self assessment process - including getting feedback from fellow writers if possible.

There is an Association of Manuscript Assessors in New Zealand which I strongly suggest you check out first. There are similar organisations and individuals advertising on line but they may be anywhere in the world.

Only the New Zealand members have the benefit of being respected by the local publishing companies. Scholastic NZ Ltd, e.g. will look at a manuscript that has been forwarded from a NZ Manuscript Assessor, where as a 'cold call,' even if accompanied by a flattering assessment from an unknown source, won't be considered.

You can find the full list, their area of interest and expertise, and contact details at: <http://www.elsewhere.co.nz/NZAMA/Index.htm>

Find someone you think will suit your work, write to them asking for a quote. Include the title of your manuscript and a word count (ask me if you need help with this). Each assessor is working on their own and will have their own way of doing things but there will be a charge. I always ask for a part payment to confirm the contract. Others may not.

A writer's relationship with rejection is like that of a fish to water – it's all that's there.

Daniel Handler
(Lemony Snicket)



I used to accept digital file submissions when the task has been agreed, others may ask for a printed copy to be posted.

THE PUBLISHING PROCESS

Submissions

You may have heard that the number of publishing companies that accept submissions from unpublished writers is shrinking. To an extent this is true. However if you have a great idea, and you pitch it to the strengths of the publisher you may get read.

That said expect to be submitted many times and don't expect to even get an acknowledgement of your submission. You will be one of many, and the shrinking staff numbers within the walls of a publishing company need to be focussing on the work already underway so looking for the next big thing in a 'slush pile' of unknowns is left to 'spare' time. Something we all know there is never enough of.

With that in mind here are some suggestions for making your submission more appealing.

1. Presentation:

Type your story on A4 at 12pt or more. Make the margins wide, at least 2cm on each side (this gives room for notations by the reader). Make sure your manuscript has your name and the title on each page, plus a page number. If the manuscript were to be dropped, could it be easily put back together?

2. Picture Books:

Don't include all the completed illustrations. A publisher will have their own preferred formats that may require the illustrations be done again to fit. Instead, either don't include any illustrations (if you've not got an illustrator in mind) or, if you wish to illustrate the project, include one piece of finished art and a complete set of roughs to show how you wish to interpret the story.

Note you should also include the manuscript typed up as outlined in #1.

3. Novel

Include a typed manuscript of the whole story. Also include a one page synopsis include the genre:

- Fiction
- Historical
- Science Fiction
- Thriller
- Mythical

Or any combination of these. The publisher may think otherwise but we are wanting the project to be introduced as quickly and clearly as possible.

4. The package

Include 1 each of the following:

A cover letter, introducing yourself and any aspects of your writing career so far that shows you as a committed writer.

1. A synopsis of the work (in the case of a novel).
2. A complete manuscript, typed as described in #1.

3. A promotional page that outlines why you believe your story will work in the market, e.g. *Fishing is described as one of the largest recreational sports in NZ.*

4. A self address and stamped envelope that is big enough to hold all of the material you have sent in. This is to encourage them to return the material (with a comment or with an offer).

The etiquette of submitting is that you don't send your story to more than one publisher at a time.

This is a hard one because the reality is you will probably not hear from that publisher, either to acknowledge receipt or to return your submission, which makes it difficult to decide when to try elsewhere. I recommend you allow a couple of months and then write a follow-up letter politely asking for acknowledgement of receipt or for the return of your submission because you wish to submit elsewhere. If you don't hear back within 4 weeks then proceed to submit elsewhere with a fresh manuscript.

Keep track of where and when you have submitted, plus the response (if any).

Remember even the best of writers go through this process and suffer rejection after rejection. It is not necessarily a reflection of your work. Though reassessing your manuscript, after you've been ignored or rejected several times, would be a good idea.

IN AN IDEAL WORLD ...

You have written your story, edited it, put it aside for several months, reread it and now feel that it is ready for the world to see, this is what I would suggest as your plan of action.

1) I recommend you share the work with your fellow writers (if you are a member of a writers group.)

2) I suggest you then approach your nearest school or library and ask if you can have your work read to a group of children, making sure you stipulate the age you believe the text is aimed at.

If at all possible get the librarian or the class teacher to share your

story while you look on, ready to talk about your work, but also so you can assess how the story is being received. Are the children totally engrossed? Do they laugh when you intend them to? Most important, do they ask to hear it read again?

3) Review your story in light of what you have learnt and then approach a manuscript assessor. Include all of the above feedback

and research in your cover letter (i.e. not all the content but the fact that you have done this).

4) Review the edited text and make any changes recommended (if you agree with it).

5) Submit the final text to a Publisher.

WHAT NEXT?

If the publisher accepts your work then follow the advice supplied on the previous page. The publisher will then negotiate a contract with an illustrator and/or a designer.

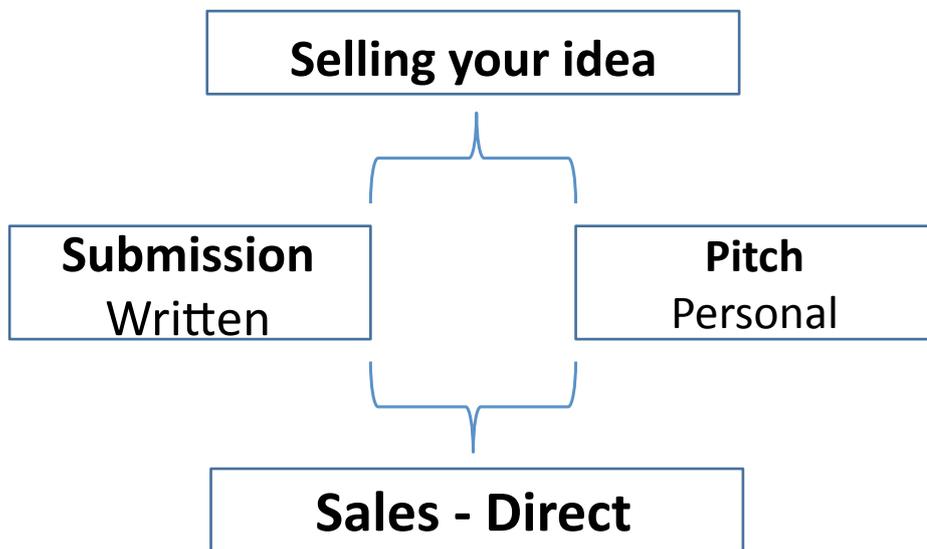
If the publisher does not accept your submission then consider self-publishing and be sure to include in your cost sufficient funds to pay for a professional illustrator and/or designer.



THE SALES PITCH

Whether you are submitting your work to a publisher or producing it yourself and then promoting it to the sales outlets, you will need to learn how to pitch your work.

- Keep it short.
- Keep to the point.
- Keep it cost effective.
- If you have statistical data to back your idea use it.
- Have a finished copy available if applicable.
- Be prepared to leave samples or reading copies.



When submitting to a publisher refer to the instructions earlier. Remember that your manuscript will arrive into a very busy office so your chances of being seen and read will be improved by presenting your work in whatever format they require so check their website for instructions for submissions.

If you decide to self publish there are a number of distribution companies out there who can be employed to sell your book in to bookshops, schools, etc. Check the resource lists (last page) for names and contact details. If you can show them your work as near to the finished book as possible then the easier it will be for them to assess your project. So consider getting 'readers copies' produced. These days companies such as Vistaprint can give you 10 copies for a reasonable price. Consider these 'review copies' NOT the finished book.

The Pitch Slam

This is a sales technique introduced as part of some Book Trade Fairs overseas, and which has been part of the Writer and Illustrator Conferences here in recent years.

To participate you will need to fill in a submission form ahead of the conference, that includes a brief synopsis and you may be asked to supply some specified part of your finished script (though not all of it). These are then submitted in order

to book your 3 - 5 minutes, where you will be asked to sell your idea to either a panel or a specific list of publishers or agents direct. You may be allowed to choose who you pitch to.

Each occasion will have a slightly different format so read the instructions carefully. You will have limited time to pitch either a completed work or just an idea, it doesn't have to be a finished book.

The recipient of your pitch will have only your written submission to go by, along with your enthusiastic sell. Time yourself before-hand to make sure you don't get cut off mid pitch. Be sure to include any statistics to strengthen your argument.

The recipient should be polite but may be quite blunt. Be prepared.

WORKING WITH AN ILLUSTRATOR

There are a number of reasons why you might find yourself working with an illustrator or a designer.

- 1) To complete a cover illustration and design
- 2) To produce chapter motifs, maps or illustrations
- 2) To complete full page illustrations for a picture book

So what are your choices regarding the financial payment and the structure of the relationship?

If you have the good fortune of being offered a publishing agreement by an established publisher know that the decision of who will illustrate your work, whether cover or picture book page, will be in the hands of the publisher.

They will also be paying for the work and they will have talents on tap that they believe will work well for your project, so listen, be grateful. Know that they will listen to anything you feel strongly about but that in the end they will decide which artist or designer to use. Remember it is to their benefit that they choose well so they have a vested interest in making the right choice.

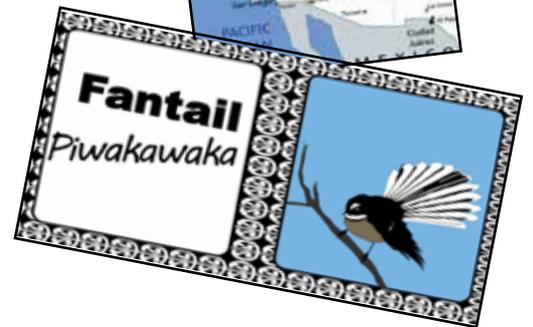
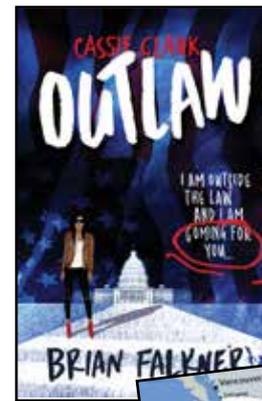
Picture Books

In the case of a picture book, an established publisher may well offer the illustrator a 50/50 royalty agreement which means that you, the writer, will share the earnings equally with the illustrator.

Take heart. Know that a strong illustrator will mean bigger sales so larger earnings in the end. It's worth the sacrifice of half the earnings to get the best there is.

Once an illustrator has been selected you will get to see the 'roughs' (i.e. the illustrator's black and white drawings completed so that the publisher can comment, move or adjust the content). You should be offered the chance to see these and be expected to comment.

The illustrator may have interpreted your story in a very different way to that imagined by you. In effect your story is the illustrator's inspiration. The publisher will be expecting the illustrator to add to the concept, even to the extent of including a whole extra story not mentioned in the text. This is not unusual and though you do have the right to ask for changes they need to only be things that are essential for the logic of the story. The illustrator does not have the right, and should not be expected to, change your text in any way. If you say 'red door' the door should be red.



~~Written by~~
Illustrated by

Picture books are often branded as 'by' the writer, and 'illustrated by' the artist.

Novels

In the case of a novel, an established publisher will hire a cover designer to illustrate and design the cover. The cost of the art and design work will be included in the general costs of the development of the book and you won't be expected to contribute anything. They should be polite enough to show you what their plans are and you may be given the opportunity to comment. Diplomacy would say only give positive feedback but you could use the sandwich approach mentioned earlier if you have something you're concerned about.

SELF PUBLISHING

If you decide to 'go it alone' you are not alone. There is a growing market in self-published books. I've given you some links in the resources section that might help you.

Be warned that if you are approached by someone offering to publish your book but they ask you for money you are NOT dealing with a publisher. You are negotiating with a print broker. There are some out there that are extremely professional and can offer you editing, design and marketing services - all of which you are paying for. So in effect you are self publishing. If you have the money and want to be published then go for it. Just know that at the end of the day the books belong

to you and ultimately you will be responsible for getting them sold.

If you do decide to proceed on your own (wether with a print broker or through other means) I caution you about getting an inexperienced artist or designer, such as a friend, neighbour or family member, to work with you. Whether you are producing a picture book or a novel, you will first be judged by the LOOK of the work, and then by the written content.

If you want to be a professional writer then your writing is your product and you need to work on it, and be prepared to promote it, as any entrepreneur would a new product or service.

Christine Dale

The success (or otherwise) of a book hinges on those vital first few seconds when a possible buyer sees your book. This makes the book's title and cover design the most important selling tool you have. **Your writing may win them over but if they've not picked up your book in the first place you'll never get them to read the content.**

Organisations:

Storylines Children's Literature Trust

Has several awards that can lead to a publishing agreement. Check their site.

NZSA - New Zealand Society of Authors

Has heaps of free information available to all.

Your local library!

Reading:

Writing from the Heart: How to Write for Children by Joy Cowley This can be purchased online through the website www.storylines.org.nz

Any children's books you can get your hands on. Make them your bedtime reading.

Book Awards of note:

NZ Booksellers Children's book award lists (name varies)

Storylines Notable Books list

CBC Australia's Book Awards

UK Guardian Children's Fiction Prize

USA Newbery Medal

USA Caldecott Medal

Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal

FURTHER RESEARCH

Novel

If you are planning to sell your book online then know that the size of your book cover may well end up the size of an postage stamp on the screen and therefore the title size, image and colour choices can be vital to whether your book will be seen at all.

If you manage to get your book into a bookshop then remember your book may end up being displayed amongst a huge pile of other books – or even spine out on the shelf.

Picture Books

The above applies with picture books as well, however, they are often displayed in stores in a Waterfall stand (see example) which effectively hides 2/3rds of the cover from view.

A good designer knows how to make the most out of these very difficult conditions.

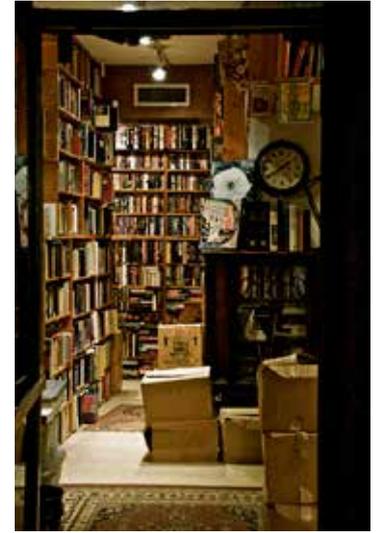
I can't emphasise enough the importance of getting professionals on your team.

Editorial / design / illustration and marketing can make a huge difference to your success.

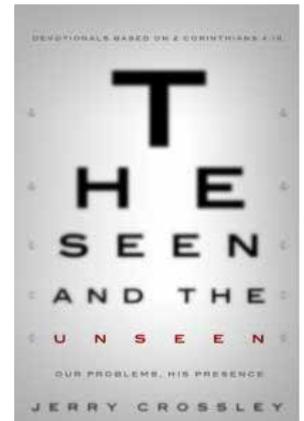
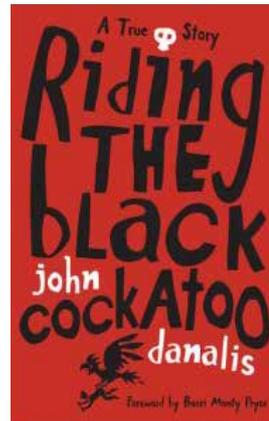
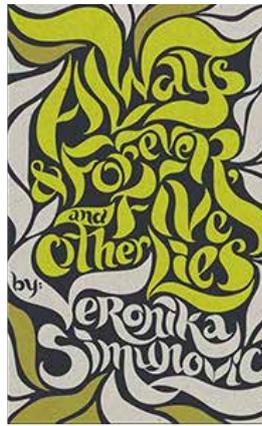


Bookshop display.

You will be amongst a huge pile of other books and may end up on a shelf spine out.

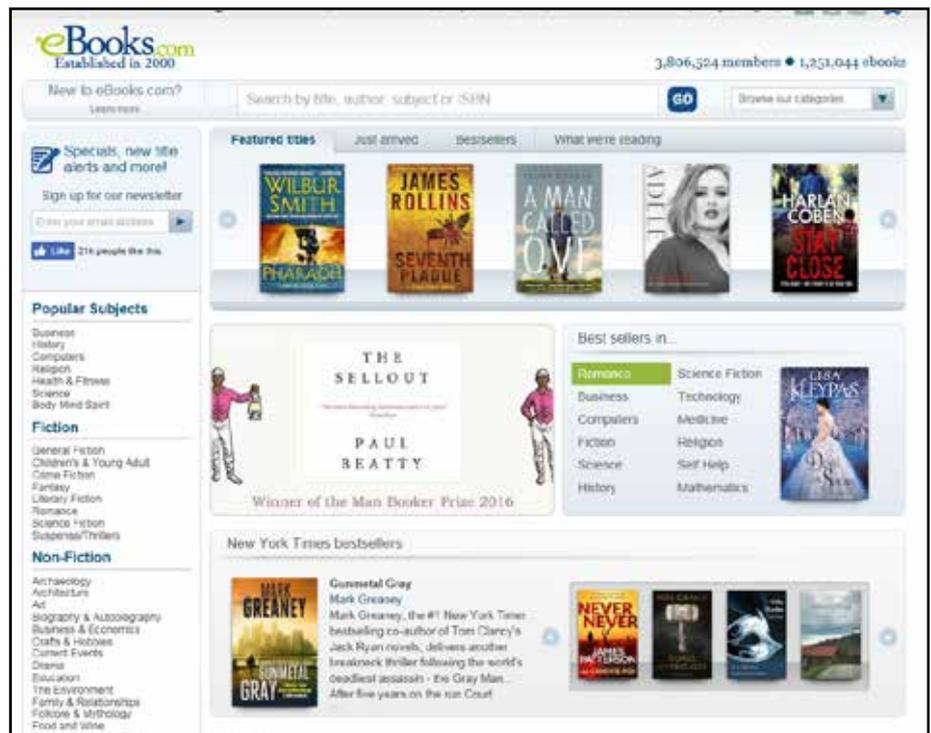


Here are some examples of professionally presented covers that just don't work.



Online display.

Your image needs to catch the eye on a very busy website.



MARKETING LINKS

- Mark Dawson, a successful self published author, talks about how he has built his list over the past 2 years.
<https://blog.reedsy.com/facebook-ads-for-authors-mark-dawson-interview>
- 8 Book Marketing Mistakes to Ban in 2017
<https://blog.reedsy.com/book-marketing-mistakes>

RESOURCES

ONLINE MAGAZINE:

Write for Kids <http://writeforkids.org>

Facebook: Kiwi Write 4 Kidz <https://www.facebook.com/groups/442450075776536/>

The Sapling <http://www.thesapling.co.nz>

The Paris Review: <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews>

WRITERS GROUP

The NZ Society of Authors: <http://authors.org.nz/writers-resources/writing-groups/>

DISTRIBUTION COMPANIES:

Book Reps <http://www.bookreps.co.nz/contact-bookreps-nz-ltd>

David Bateman Ltd <http://www.bateman.co.nz>

Nationwide Book Distributors <http://www.nationwidebooks.co.nz/book-distribution>

Pressgang (I don't personally know this one) <http://www.pressgang.co.nz/contact>

Publishers Distribution Ltd (refer Book Reps)

Scholastic NZ Ltd Book Club / Duffy Books / Book Fairs <http://www.scholastic.co.nz/about/contact-us/>

South Pacific Books Distributors Ltd <http://www.spbooks.co.nz>

Wheelers <http://www.wheelers.co.nz/contact/>

David Bateman Ltd <http://www.bateman.co.nz>

SITES FOR THE WORST IN COVER DESIGN:

I have to say that the following are more the title/illustration combination than worst designs but if you don't mind some rather sleazy references these are at least a little amusing:

- World's Worst Book Covers <http://www.wheelercentre.com/notes/aca7998f0650>
- 40 worst covers <http://www.boredpanda.com/funny-book-titles-covers/>

Christine Dale Dip Bus

Christine worked for Scholastic NZ Ltd for over 25 years - including 10 years as the Publishing Manager. During that time their publishing list grew from a mere 5 titles per year to over 50 and the number of awards won grew from 0 to averaging 2 a year or more.

Since retiring in 2008 she has continued to be involved in the industry, supporting new writers and illustrators with her manuscript assessment service, designing the occasional book and editing. She is now co-director of OneTree House, an independent publishing house aimed at supporting New Zealand's established writers and illustrators.

www.onetree-house.com