

# How Do You Plan A Children's Story?

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You have an idea for a children's story, but aren't sure how to get it started.

What's the first step?

Is there a first step?

Is there a step-by-step procedure?

What's involved?

There are lots of questions that may come up for new writers, but there's really no 'for every writer' answer.

What will work for one writer, may not for another. What may feel comfortable for one writer, may not for another.

But with that said, there are several things that every new writer should know about before jumping in. Those things are the elements of a story.

## **1. THE PLOT.**

Sometimes the plot isn't the very first thing that starts a story. It's usually an idea for a story.

Once you have the idea, then think about how it can evolve, bringing the main character (protagonist) through obstacles to reach his goal. That's your plot.

In the middle grade book, "[Walking Through Walls](#)," the main character, Wang, wants to become rich and powerful. The goal, how he goes about achieving it (his struggles), and the resolution is the plot.

Goals + Struggles + Resolution = Plot

Plot also involves having the character grow in some way through the process of reaching his goal.

Another important element of plot is to have a beginning, middle, and an end to the story. It also needs to be easily understandable, and it needs to make sense.

What I find sometimes as a children's ghostwriter is that some new authors don't realize that what they know about their story may not be clearly translated on the page for the reader.

If you're not sure whether you're missing the mark here, have someone read the story and let you know if they had to pause anywhere or got lost somewhere.

## **2. THE STORY STRUCTURE.**

This is the element of writing your children's story where you make a number of decisions:

1. How will you begin the story?

It's recommended to start your story with action. Let the reader get immediately engaged and involved.

2. Should you write it in first-person or third-person.

For a quick example of these two point of views (POVs):

-I went to the store. (The main character is telling the story. The first-person pronoun is 'I.')

-He went to the store. (A narrator is telling the story. This is third-person and the pronoun is 'he or she ... or it.')

Note: There are other POVs, but these two are the most popular, third-person being more popular than first-person.

3. What tense will you use for your story: present tense or past tense.

Here are two examples:

- I wish I can go to the park. (Present tense – it's happening here and now.)  
- He wished he could go to the park. (Past tense – the story has already happened.)

Once you choose a tense, you need to stick with it throughout the story.

Another aspect of POV is that, for children's books, there should be only one main character. The story is told through his or her eyes.

## **3. THE CHARACTERS.**

**The main character:**

Your story will need a main character. This is the character the story revolves around.

It's important to make this character life-like. Give him depth and personality. He should have good qualities along with a flaw or two. And, bring this character to life as soon as he enters the stage.

Make the main character three-dimensional.

### **Secondary characters:**

The story should also have secondary characters. These characters go along with the main character through his journey. They can be supportive and even unintentionally cause problems.

For a children's chapter book or middle grade book, it'd be a good idea to have one or two (at the most) secondary characters. Children's books should be easy to follow along with. Too many characters can complicate things – like too many cooks in the kitchen.

For a secondary character, think of Robin to Batman or Dr. Watson to Sherlock Holmes. There's even Ron and Hermione to Harry Potter.

### **Tertiary characters:**

These characters appear in the story for a short period, a scene or two.

They're there for a specific purpose (to move the story forward), but aside from that, the reader doesn't know much about them.

An example of this would be from *Walking Through Walls*. The main character, Wang, hit his foot with the broad side of an ax. He was in excruciating pain and called out for help from a fellow student.

The student, not named, explained that he couldn't offer help. They were to fend for themselves. If they couldn't do that, they couldn't help others.

That was the only mention of this character, but it was an important scene. It showed Wang, and the reader, how things worked there.

These are three of the top types of characters. For a full list, visit:

<https://www.writerscookbook.com/character-types-story/>

## **Getting to know your characters:**

There are many experienced writers who say you should get to know each of your characters before you start your story.

This is a good idea because it gives you foresight into what a character may or may not do. You will know how that character will react in certain situations and what drives the character.

This provides a comfort level for most writers. It's like having a well outlined story before actually starting the first draft.

There are other writers who are pantsers. They work from a thin outline if any at all and the characters unveil themselves as the writer writes the story.

I work with outlines, but I'm also a pantser.

I'll start a story not knowing a thing about the main character or any other character in the story. My typing fingers unveil it all.

On the flip side, as I mentioned there is an element of comfort in having an outline. Even if you don't have all the details on each character, you know where the story starts, how it will rise to its climax, and how it will be resolved. All you do is fill in the details.

## **4. THE SETTING.**

The setting is where the story takes place and the time period it takes place. It's the main character's surroundings.

In *Walking Through Walls*, the setting is 16<sup>th</sup> century China.

To create a realistic setting, if it's not the present time period or area you live in, you need to do research. Readers want to be absorbed in a story and they want to know that what they're reading is based on facts, even if it's a fiction story.

If it's a science fiction or fantasy story, then you will need to create your own world. But, be sure it can be understood by the reader and is believable.

Speaking of setting and how it can play a crucial part of your story, Wang was 12 years old when he went on his journey to become rich and powerful. He left his family to do this.

In a present-day setting, this would most likely be unheard of, unrealistic, and even dangerous. But in 16<sup>th</sup> century China, it was certainly plausible.

## **5. CONFLICT.**

Your plot revolves around the story conflict. The conflict provides tension.

Conflicts can be internal or external. They can be caused by the antagonist (bad guy), emotional turmoil, a personal challenge, a physical handicap, troubled relationships, the elements, or other.

### **Introduction and Inciting Incident**

The conflict begins with an inciting incident.

In *Walking Through Walls*, Wang is sick and tired of tending the wheat field with his father. He makes up his mind to set out on his own to reach his goal – becoming an Eternal.

In *Toy Story 2*, it would be when Woody is kidnapped.

This story is a great example of conflict. The main characters (Woody and Buzz) make several attempts to overcome their obstacles – getting Woody back home.

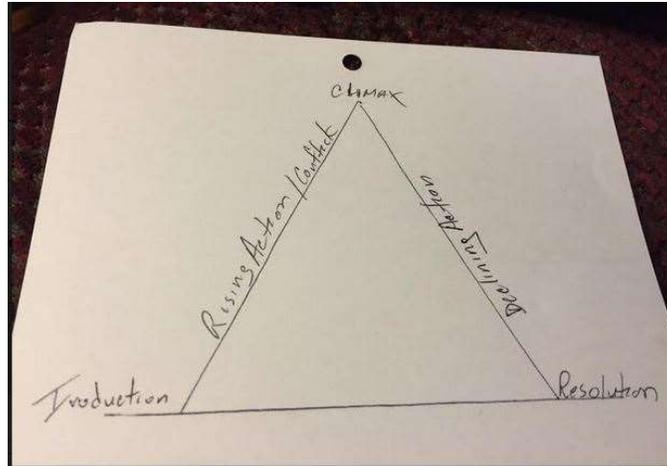
They try, they fail. They try and fail a couple of more times before they finally succeed.

With conflict, you don't want the main character to succeed the first try. You want to see her struggle as the conflict rises.

### **Rising Action**

This is where rising action and conflict come in.

Be sure to make your conflict rise, intensify upward to a peak (the climax) – think of a pyramid.



## **The Climax**

It's at the climax of the story that the main character begins to turn the tides.

She figures out how to reach her goal or gets the help needed to gain headway.

In *Walking Through Walls*, the climax is when Wang learns how to 'walk through walls' and is outside a merchant's house, ready to walk through the wall of the house and steal.

## **Descending Action**

In this section, the conflict lessens. The main character is on the way down the other side of the pyramid, toward the bottom to a resolution.

He's on the offensive. He knows how to succeed.

## **6. THE RESOLUTION.**

The resolution comes after the main character descends from the story's climax, from the peak of the pyramid.

He reaches his goal.

The story gets wrapped up at the resolution.

In children's stories, the main character becomes the hero in the resolution. He or she has gone through the obstacles and figured out how to reach the goal. The main character is triumphant.

This part of the story should have all loose ends neatly tied up.

Don't leave the reader wondering what happened to secondary character, Pete, after he took a wrong turn in the next to last chapter.

If something is mentioned in the story and could leave the reader wondering what happened, resolve it by the resolution (end) of the story.

## **7. THE THEME.**

The theme of your story is the take-away-value.

It could be your initial idea is to write a story on bullying or intolerance or being kind. It could be on mixed-families, on honoring parents, on sibling rivalry. It could be on anything you feel is important to bring to a child's attention through story.

The theme is usually something that will help children in their own lives and should be shown subtly. Don't try to hit the reader over his head with it.

You may not know what the theme is when your first start writing, but along the way it should make itself apparent.

## **8. THE 'FEEL' OF YOUR STORY.**

The feel of your story is created by three elements: tone, mood, and style.

### **Tone.**

According to The Editor's Blog, "Tone in fiction is the *attitude* of the narrator or viewpoint character toward story events and other characters. In a story with first-person POV, tone can also be the narrator's attitude toward the reader."

How does the character speak? Is he arrogant, does he curse, is he sarcastic, is he sweet, is he bossy? How he uses his words and sentences will show what attitude the character has.

Word choices and sentence structure create tone. And, tone can be "altered by the way the viewpoint character or narrator" reacts to the obstacles he's confronted with. It can also be altered by how he treats the other characters in the story as well as how he reacts to his surroundings.

## **Mood.**

How you want the reader to feel is established through the mood of the story.

Back to The Editor's Blog, "Mood can be expressed in terms such as dark, light, rushed, suspenseful, heavy, lighthearted, chaotic, and laid-back."

The mood of the story should change as the main character goes through his obstacles, especially when the story reaches its climax. The reader should feel apprehension.

If you've added humor to the story, the reader should smile, feel lighthearted.

## **Style.**

This is how you use your words to create the story and the story's feel.

For *Walking Through Walls*, I chose words and sentences that would fit with 16<sup>th</sup> century China. I eliminated contractions from the dialogue. The characters spoke formally and were respectful.

I used this style choice based on the time period and it gives the story an authentic 'flavor.'

So, it's easy to see that style is dependent on the story topic.

Every writer has her own unique style, but it can be altered to fit the circumstances of the story.

Say you have a secondary character like "young Sheldon," who is in college classes at around ten years old. His speech will differ from a boy the same age, who is struggling with fifth grade reading. Sentence structure and reactions would vary from boy to boy.

Style is used to create and affect tone and mood.

The tone, style, and mood of your story is what makes it unique to you.

For a lot more on this writing element, check out:

Tone, Mood, and Style - The Feel of Fiction

<https://theeditorsblog.net/2013/04/19/tone-mood-style-the-feel-of-fiction/>

## **THE WRAP UP.**

Wrapping this article up, award-winning author Aaron Shepherd says it best, "The strongest children's stories have well-developed themes, engaging plots, suitable structure, memorable characters, well-chosen settings, and attractive style. For best results, build strength in *all* areas."

<http://www.aaronshep.com/youngauthor/elements.html>

So, going back to the very first question in this article, the first step of planning a children's story is to know what's involved in creating a good one.

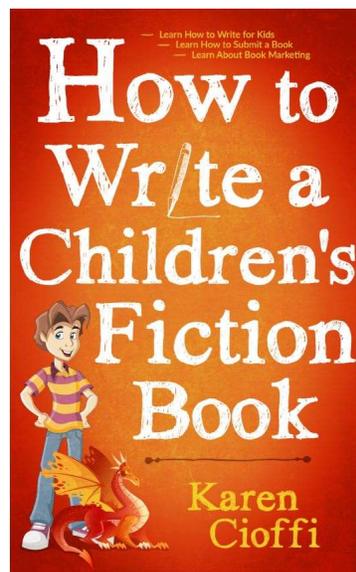
**A great tool to help you get your children's story off the ground and finish it:**

### ***How to Write a Children's Fiction Story***

This 200+ page book (ebook or paperback) covers everything from choosing your target audience, to building character and dialogue, to writing the middle and end, and so much more.

**Check out all it offers at:**

<https://karencioffiwritingforchildren.com/diy/>



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen Cioffi is an award-winning children's author, working children's ghostwriter and coach, and author/writer online platform instructor with WOW! Women on Writing.

She is also the founder and editor-in-chief of Writers on the Move as well as a former fiction staff writer for two children's learning centers.

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