

Writing a Publishable And Marketable Children's Book

The Foundation of Every Children's Story

By Karen Cioffi

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While every story starts with a good idea, that's not enough to make a good story.

Your idea, while possibly the cornerstone of the creation, is only part of the foundation. There are other elements needed to make a fully developed story.

To give you an example of this, a protagonist wants to take guitar lessons. He takes lessons and becomes an excellent guitar player. Your message is to show children they can do the same.

This isn't a storyline. It's a series of events. There's nothing at stake.

Why would someone want to read about a character taking lessons to learn to play the guitar or any other instrument?

But suppose something stops the protagonist or gets in the way of the him learning to play.

This gives the story idea substance – it adds stakes – it adds conflict.

This is what publishers want.

This is what young readers want.

Below are the basic elements that create a story foundation.

1. The idea.

As a children's ghostwriter, clients come to me with a number of ideas. But, they're just ideas. They're not stories.

An idea could be a child wants to become an astronaut.

Again, this isn't a story. But it is a key part of the foundation of a good story.

2. The problem, the conflict.

There needs to be an age appropriate problem or dilemma that the main character needs to overcome. It should be introduced at the very beginning of the story.

Every children's fiction story must have a problem or obstacle that the main character has to overcome.

The conflict drives the story.

According to Now Novel, "conflict is at the heart of all stories."

Going back to the guitar scenario, suppose the main character has started and stopped a number of hobbies or sporting activities. Now his parents refuse to invest in a guitar and lessons.

This creates a problem for the character – how is he going to get a guitar and afford to pay for lessons.

Or, if he's a younger protagonist, how will he convince his parents that this activity will be different. That he'll follow through with it.

3. The struggle.

The main character needs to attempt and fail at overcoming his problem.

Let the action/conflict rise. Then have the main character, through thought process and problem-solving skills, solve it on her own. If an adult is involved, keep the input and help at a bare minimal.

Kid's love action and problem solving!

In children's writing, three is the general rule for attempts. On the third try at achieving his goal, the main character finally gets it. He's triumphant.

If the protagonist gets what he wants in one try, it doesn't drive the stakes up. It's too easy.

A reader turns the pages to follow along with the struggles. It's the struggles that strengthens the connection between the main character and the reader. This makes the reader feel like the final victory is his too.

4. There's got to be growth.

The story has to be about more than just the initial idea. It has to be about more than just incidents in a story.

Incidents are simply a series of events or occurrences. They don't change the character.

By the end of the story, the protagonist needs to have developed or grown in some way.

- Maybe he becomes wiser.
- Maybe he learns to stand on his own two feet and overcomes what he must to accomplish what he wants.
- Maybe he learns it's okay to be different.
- Maybe he learns there's more to him than he thought.
- Maybe he figures out there are things more important than riches and power.
- Maybe he learns the importance of friendship.
- Maybe he learns the importance of being honest.

This list could go on and on.

Character growth is essential to a good story.

5. Be subtle.

Your story should be written so that the reader will see for herself the message you want to convey.

I've seen many stories and story endings where the reader is hit over the head with the message.

Let the message be woven subtly throughout the story. And, know that the reader is savvy enough to get it.

6. Point of view.

The story should have a single point of view (POV). To write with a single point of view means that if your main character can't see, hear, touch or feel it, it doesn't exist.

Example: "Mary crossed her eyes behind Joe's back." If Joe is the main character, this can't happen because Joe wouldn't be able to see it.

7. Make it age appropriate.

Make sure your story has age-appropriate words, dialogue, and action.

8. Sentence structure.

Keep sentences short and as with all writing, keep adjectives and adverbs to a minimum. And, watch your punctuation and grammar.

9. Show, don't tell.

Write your story by showing through action and dialogue rather than telling.

Here's an example of telling:

Thomas was nervous. He wanted to hit the ball. He lifted the bat and he slammed the ball.

Now, here's an example of showing:

Thomas looked at the pitcher. He dug his heels in the dirt and wiggled the bat a bit to get in a comfortable position. He bent his knees and raised the bat to his shoulder. Then he dug in a little more. SWING!

If you can't seem to get the right words to show a scene, try using dialogue instead; it's an easy alternative.

10. Write tight.

It's important to keep your writing tight, especially for picture books. This means don't say something with 10 words if you can do it with 5. Get rid of unnecessary words.

These 10 steps are the foundation to your children's story.

Keep them in mind when writing yours.

About the Author

Karen Cioffi is an award-winning children's author, children's ghostwriter, rewriter, 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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Every day is
a permanent
page of your
life's story that
cannot be edited,

~ *Rebecca Murtagh*

*Live
it
well.*



Karen Cioffi, Children's Ghostwriter