



***12 Empowering Tips
for
Children's Writers***



by Mona Hodgson

Hi, Friend!

I shared a bedroom and a closet with at least one younger sister, and a bathroom with all three of them. As the oldest of four girls, the writer in me (though dormant at the time) craved space – solitude. I found that refuge in a mulberry tree in our front yard. I discovered another bonus of sitting in a tree – a different perspective or view of the world around me.

Writing for kids is like building a tree house for them. Through our written words, we can give kids a space all their own. They can climb into our story, poem, nonfiction article, rebus, or book and find entertainment, answers, hope, encouragement, comfort, inspiration, and a godly perspective as we share our Christian worldview.

So . . . I have fifteen tips I hope will encourage and equip you as you write for today's kiddos.

Grace and peace,

Mona

12 Empowering Tips for Children's Writers

1: You have permission to think like a child.

The best children's writers engage life with the senses of a child. Please take advantage of that perk. The general consensus among children's book editors is that too many adults refer to and call upon adult experiences and attitudes that don't translate for children.

#2: Knowing about the standard age groups gives you a leg up.

Children's publishers know that one size does not fit all. Children don't need, like, or care about the same things at the various age levels. Their language and cognitive skills vary from age group to age group. And so do their interests. As children's writers we must determine the age group and the specific segment of children we're writing for in each story, article, or book. Age group breakdowns are subjective from publishing house to publishing house, but here are some general guidelines.

- Pre-School: Birth to age 4. Pre-Reading, an introduction to books and reading. Board Books and Picture Books.
- Early readers (Primary): ages 4-8. These kids are making the transition to reading with help. Picture Books and Early Readers.
- Middle Readers (Juvenile): 8-12. These students are mostly reading on their own. First Chapter Books, nonfiction books, and novels.

#3: Here's an overview of the various formats . . .

BOARD BOOKS

- Birth to 4 years. Some publishers break it down further--birth to 2 and 2 to 4. Pre-school. Newborn to toddlers.
- Generally 12-16 pages—sometimes 16 or more.
- 50-200 words or less.
- Many come in various materials (fabric, vinyl), novelty shapes or designs.

PICTURE BOOKS

- Generally, 32 pages. The most common alternative is 24 pages. Sometimes 16, 40, or 48 pages.
- 300-800 words.
- The more dependent the story is upon illustration, the fewer words necessary. For an example, see *Bedtime in the Southwest*.

EARLY (BEGINNING) READERS

Some are categorized by Grade Level, others by Reading Level. The various early reader lines include I Can Read, Ready-to-Read, and Step into Reading.

- Primary ages 6-9, sometimes 4-7. The specifics are subject to the book line established by the publisher.
- Helps kids make the transition from being read to, to learning to master basic reading skills.
- They generally run 800-1500 words.
- Usually 48-64 pages.
- Everything from black and white line drawings to multi-color illustrations.
- Word choices are especially important for children learning to read for themselves.

FIRST CHAPTER BOOKS

Like the Early or Beginning Readers, some are offered by grade level, some aren't. An early reader, these are designed as a beginning reader's first book divided into chapters.

- They bridge the gap between picture books and novels.
- Ages 6 to 9 or 7 to 10, depending upon the publisher.
- About 64-80 pages.
- Usually eight to ten chapters.
- They generally run 800-2,000 words long.
- If illustrated, usually, simple black and white drawings.
- Use a single viewpoint character to prevent confusion and to foster reader identification.
- First person or third person.

MIDDLE READERS

- Third through sixth grade.
- Usually ages 8-12.
- Length varies, but usually runs between 20,000-30,000 words.
- 96-128 pages.
- Largest reading group.
- Can tackle a larger vocabulary,
- Longer and more complex sentences.
- They don't have to know the meaning of every word.

For an example of a devotional book, you might look at *Real Girls of the Bible*. My favorite middle reader novels include *Because of Winn Dixie*, *Fever 1793*, *Don't You Know There's A War On?*, and *The Octave of Angels*.

#4: The audience and the market are not the same for books for younger children.

While kids preschool age through about second grade are your primary audience, they are not the real market. Who are the buyers of these books? Adults! Questions to ask yourself: "Would an adult enjoy reading this book to a child?" What do you look for in those purchases?

#5: Board Books, Picture Books, and the first levels of Early Readers require a lot of sentences and scenes that are easily illustrated.

Varied settings and action are necessary to compel readers to turn the pages. Think about the possible visuals for each page or spread (left and right pages).

#6: Illustrations are not your responsibility when you publish with a traditional publisher.

Things to keep in mind:

- A professional artist is not the same as a skilled and experienced picture book illustrator.
- No need to send illustrations or art direction with the proposal, unless it's a detail necessary to the story.
- Because the characters and action will be illustrated. You have more words to focus on the other senses—smell, texture, sound and taste. As long as they enhance the story and not bog down the plot line.

If you publish with a traditional publisher, their design director will assign an illustrator and work directly with them. Unless you self-publish, in which case you have complete control and responsibility, you get to focus on the written words and leave the illustrations to a design team. Staying up on the latest artist styles, techniques, and which illustrators are doing what is what Children's book editors and design directors are all about. Because of that, they're able to play mix and match with books and illustrations.

#7: *The Children's Writer's Word Book* is a great resource!

If you're writing for beginning and emergent readers, this resource is invaluable. You can look up a word and see the grade level as well as options for the grade level you're working on.

#8: Periodical and magazines can provide a great opportunity to break-in to the children's market.

The options include: Print and online, general, denominational, non-denominational, and devotional for various age groups. *Hello* (Highlights), *High Five* (Highlights), *Story Friends* (Mennonite), *Keys for Kids*, *Spider*, *Pockets* (Methodists), *Clubhouse* and *Clubhouse Jr.* (Focus on the Family). Online Writer's Guidelines from the publisher will tell you what that particular publication prints. Fiction, nonfiction, poetry, rebus, retold Bible stories, recipes, crafts, etc. Rebuses are especially popular with nonreaders and early readers. Rebus are picture-oriented, but help to expand an emergent reader's vocabulary and ability to connect images with words. Keep the language simple. Choose words to pictorialize that are easily recognizable. When submitting a rebus to an editor, underline the words you want illustrated.

#9: A solid story has a definite and strong Beginning, Middle, and End.

Put your main character in the first paragraph and start your story at a point of interest. What is it your character wants to achieve or overcome? What will stand in their way? What will your character do in the face of (age appropriate) conflict? Take your character and the reader through the obstacles all the way to a satisfying resolution.

#10: Your main character and how you present him or her matters.

Choose a main character through which the reader will experience the story. That's your point-of-view character. In Middle Readers for ages 8 to 12, you have the option to skillfully alternate a couple of point-of-view characters. For the younger readers, you'll need a single POV character and a simple storyline.

#11: Use the opening lines of your book to hook the reader.

You have about a minute or two to hook your reader and draw them into the topic or story of your book. Begin at point of interest or action. The character is doing something. Don't bog down the story with backstory (unnecessary background) or length description

#12: Every good story delivers character transformation.

The main character discovers truth about herself or himself, and it changes them. Through this set of events, what did the character learn about herself, his world, other people, God? Did he conquer fear? Learn to pray? Change her mind about a false belief?