

Checklists and Advice from Laura

ADVICE FOR PICTURE BOOK AUTHORS

The form of the picture book looks deceptively simple—after all, how hard can it be to write a generally 32-page story of about 250 to 550 words? In fact, though, this very economy places great demands on the writer. I'm including a checklist for the elements that I believe are essential to strong picture books. I hope this list will help you make your own manuscripts agent- and editor-ready.

Checklist for Picture books

- Craft a story with a simple, clear plot. A plot or story structure is necessary even for books for younger children. Poetry books or quieter books like bedtime stories need to be based on a single situation or unifying concept that gets developed so there still is tension, story progression, and resolution.
- Focus on a child's point-of-view or perspective. The protagonists of children's books are children about the age of the reader, and the exception actually proves the rule. If you have an adult central character in your picture book, usually that adult actually has a kid's way of approaching the world.
- Tell a good story that lends itself to a balance between text and illustration. The text needs to tell a story in a fun, vivid, and interesting way, but it also needs to leave room for the illustrator. It's important for the author not to overwrite or to include information that should be the purview of the illustrator.
- Get your story going right away. Begin in the middle of the action—there is no room for background information in such a short form, and the art provides an immediate context for what characters look like, etc.
- Make every word count. These days, most picture books don't exceed 600 words.
- Be honest in dealing with your subject matter, but keep the tone upbeat even if the subject is difficult or sad.
- Think visually. Keep things moving and interesting.
- Do your homework and know how and what agents want to see in picture book submissions.
- If you are an illustrator, send color reproductions not original art. Upload art to the web, so you can just email the link if it is requested. Have jpegs or pdfs that you can send.
- Browse in the picture book section. A lot! Know the competition, but also be aware that from the time the deal is made it can take anywhere from 2 years (if things move really fast) to 5 years for the book to be published, so sometimes looking at current books won't give you an idea of current trends.
- Read your story out loud. Picture books need to work on the page AND out loud.
- Create a story that invites and can hold up to repeat readings.
- Make a dummy. This exercise will help you work on the story arc, pacing, the balance of text and illustration, and help you figure out how the story should unfold, visually.
- Think about your page-turning points.
- Be creative and playful in your use of language, and remember the passion, joy, and immediacy with which your audience experiences the world.

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ADVICE FOR FICTION WRITERS

I'm including my checklist for fiction in the hopes that it will help you make your own manuscripts both agent- and editor-ready. This is a list of criteria I use in assessing the fiction that is submitted to me by authors seeking representation. Not coincidentally, the middle-grade and young adult novels I choose to represent succeed on pretty much all these counts.

Checklist for Fiction

- Craft beginnings that reveal *Who, What, Where, and "Why Should We Care."* Of course, you're not explicitly going to tell us why we should care about what happens in those first pages, but the way you choose to introduce us to your world, characters, and story should engage us and make us care what happens next.
- Show character through action.
- Throw a party and make sure your readers arrive fashionably late.

- Make your story take off in the very first pages.
- Create defining conflict. At the beginning of the story, introduce the central conflict of the narrative.
- Hook your readers by raising questions in their minds.
- Take control of the story and show us where to focus our attention.
- Sustain the forward momentum of the narrative throughout.
- Raise the stakes and compel us to read on.
- Keep the reader in suspense, preferably on the edge of his or her seat. Limit time, limit information, and remember to parcel out pieces of the plot puzzle one at a time.
- Throw obstacles in the path of your protagonist and create conflict.
- Use a vicious cycle of external and internal pressures on your protagonist.
- Focus on the adolescent conflicts of "To Be or Who Not To Be?" (See below)
- Plot with a consciousness of the character's dramatic arc (your characters should change by the end).
- Make the escalating pressures on your protagonist the agent for the character's change.
- Use the fear dynamic—keep the pressure on and keep us wondering what will happen next.
- Push your characters to their limits so we can see what lies below the surface.
- Honor your contract with the reader. Fulfill the expectations you create, so you don't wind up with unsatisfied readers.
- Make us think and feel.
- Write beyond the ending

To Be or Who Not To Be?

Bestselling author Michael Connelly quotes advice he received a long time ago: "The best crime novels aren't about how a detective works the case; they're about how a case works on a detective." Though Connelly is talking about mysteries, his point applies to all fiction: External pressures leading to internal ones inherently make for a fascinating read. In middle-grade and YA fiction, these pressures typically center on the experience of young readers who are its target audience.

The defining conflict in these stories revolves around the issue of identity because kids this age are trying to figure out their place in their peer group, in their families, in society and in the world. Some important categories of conflict are:

- conflict with self
- conflict with peers
- conflict with family or familial structure (including lack of family)
- conflict with authority, belief systems or society
- conflict with the natural world

The escalating pressures on the protagonist usually center around one type of conflict that is the driving force of the story.