

WRITERS GOTTA WRITE: PICTURE BOOKS

By Jill Marshall

Advice from a well-published author, and many authored publisher

A how-to guide on writing picture books

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Go to www.jillmarshall.co for more information about Jill's books, training and coaching and publishing company.

Introduction

I've written many picture books over the years, including KAVE-TINA ROX which was published in English and French, in paperback and hard cover. So, of the dozen picture books I've created over the past few years (which is not that many as I'm more of a novelist than picture book writer), I've been fortunate enough to have one go into print and actually reach the marketplace.

I'm not saying that facetiously. I'm genuinely proud to say that I have a picture book strike rate of about 8%. Seriously. I've published several picture books by other writers, and I know that the strike rate for those authors is even lower.

You see, throughout my time as a writing coach and publisher, I've assessed and edited hundreds of the wee blighters, if not thousands. The ratio of picture books to any other type of fiction that I see is probably about ten to one. Extrapolate those figures for the broader publishing world, and you will note that the number of picture books submitted to publishers is huge.

The numbers that make it into a published version? Tiny. Miniscule. Microscopic.

There are two major reasons for this.

Firstly, picture books are very costly to produce. Even in this digital age when some of the print challenges may be overcome, they're still expensive and complex to put together, requiring the input and expertise of far more people and processes than your average novel. Weird, isn't it, when a picture book is so small by comparison?

Still, other than the strange fact that those teeny-weeny *pamphlets* take more dollars to produce than, say, *Gone With the Wind*, that reason for small numbers of picture books making it to market will be quite easy to get your head around. They cost a lot. It's an economic, business decision. That much, I'm sure, you can appreciate, even if you don't much like it.

The second reason for small numbers of picture books, however, is more difficult to explain to picture book writers. I don't know quite how to put it without offending people ... so I'm just going to take a deep breath and blurt it out.

Most of the picture books submitted aren't very good.

Ahem. Sorry, but there: I said it. Are you still talking to me? I hope so, because this is really the most helpful tip I can give you. Do, please, read on ...

Now, there may be a hundred different factors that contribute to that overall statement. The submitted picture book may not be a complete no-hoper. It could be a curate's egg of a picture book, or an almost-there picture book. It may be, quite simply, that the author doesn't know what they don't know about the creation of a picture book.

If you suspect that you have one (or many) of those on your hands, then this guide is for you. I'm going to take you, step by step, through all the information you could need to know about picture books. In that way, your book will not fall under the banner of 'not published because it wasn't very good'. It may still be affected by the first reason that few picture books are published, but you'll know that you've done your level best, and nobody could have asked for more.

In fact, these days you might even think: I've given it a try with the publishers, and while I know there's nothing wrong with my book, they still haven't gone for it. Okay. Now I'm going to do it myself (see my guide to writing and publishing in the 21st century, the first Writers Gotta Write book in the series).

So ... ready? Come on, then. It's going to be fine.

Jillx

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WRITERS GOTTA WRITE ... PICTURE BOOKS

Chapter 1: Picture It Now

So you'd like to write a picture book? It's a popular choice, and one with which you're going to have enormous fun.

It's also rather a contradiction in terms. Surely you can't *write* a picture book? You have to *draw* a picture, don't you?

You would imagine that was the case, but many picture books are created without the author being able to draw a thing. If you're like me, you'll barely be able to remember how to hand-write your signature, let alone think about becoming the next Quentin Blake.

What you need to do to write your picture books is to understand exactly how they are constructed and use some of your lovely language and imagery to create some of the pictures, but then be sure to leave enough flexibility for the illustrator (because there will be one, at some stage!) to work their particular brand of magic.

And this is where this picture book guide comes in. Throughout the chapters that follow, we'll look at all aspects of building - and I use the term deliberately - a wonderful picture book. You will learn some industry norms and tricks that will enable you to construct your picture book powerfully, showing that you've thought about it, and telling the reader and the person who might publish your book that you know what you're doing.

It all starts here.

Introduction

In the course of my training and manuscript assessing, it has struck me that probably sixty to

seventy percent of people who tell me they want to write *children's books* are actually talking about creating a picture book. When I tell people that I write children's books, it's often assumed that I only write picture books, when in fact I also write novels for children and adults.

Correction. I *mainly* write novels for children and adults.

A *children's book* can be anything from a hardback introduction to shapes for a baby, to a young adult novel of hundreds of thousands of words.

Just to be clear then, what we're discussing here is a book for a zero to six year old or thereabouts, with as much illustration as text, if not more.

Furthermore, the same book will not do for the zero year old as the three year old, or the three year old as the six year old, so you will see there is a huge amount of segregation in the picture book oeuvre. The younger the 'reader' (in other words, the smaller the child), the more tightly bound the age ranges. With adults, you can write a novel for 25 +, or 35 – 55; in effect, you can pretty much ignore the age of your reader and just get on with enjoying the writing process. For babies, the age band could be as narrow as Just Born to 6 months. And that's challenging in itself.

What I've also found, particularly after assessing picture books, is that I end up saying the same things to most people. Aha, I thought, after going through the very same issues and explanations with hundreds of writers: why not say these same things to picture book authors *before* they've sweated over their idea, fallen out with their neighbour whom they've asked to do the illustrations and then – eek – not liked them, or been rejected by one or more publishers with no idea why.

This book, then, contains a compilation of what I usually tell authors when I'm assessing a completed manuscript. Hopefully I can save you some time and frustration if you've picked this up before or during your creation of the next 'Where the Wild Things Are'.

But let's start with the fundamentals.

Why do you want to write picture books?

(NB You may have a notebook for your writing, to jot down ideas and so on. If you do - and it's a good idea - then start noting your reasons down in there. Then when you're struggling with your book in a few months' time, you can flip back to the first few pages of your notebook and remind yourself of your motivation. "Ah, yes!" you'll cry. "I wanted to write for children because ... because I had this great story that I wanted to get down on paper. And hey, look at that - I've nearly done it!"

In fact, there may be many times when you'll need little reminders of what on earth you're doing this writing mullarkey for - so if you can pause now, go out and find yourself a beautiful, tactile notebook that is going to make you feel good about writing just by touching it, then off you go. And if not, don't worry, some A4 from the printer will do.

Then, as you scribble in your squat little chunky velvety nubby old notebook, be very grateful that I don't have you in a training room; otherwise I'd be breathing down your neck and forcing you to fess up in front of a room full of strangers. Go on, write something else. Just because you can!).

What did you write? You may have listed one reason or a whole heap of them!

There are no wrong answers, of course.

Often we find that the people wanting to write picture books are primary teachers or parents/grandparents of young children, and have just re-discovered the thrill of watching small faces light up in wonderment. Sometimes what is added into this is the thought that the picture books you're reading are *not actually all that good*, and surely you could do better. Go on, you're allowed to say it. I won't tell anyone.

There are many varied reasons for people to focus on picture book writing, and they may include the following:

The ones I read to little Freddie/Room2/fourth of Grandkids Galore are really not very good.

Okay, fair enough. Now take into account the figures I told you about in the introduction, and you'll be wondering how on earth these books managed to sneak past an editor. The fact is, they will be what that publisher was looking for at the time. It may not be to your taste, of course.

And yet, what does little Freddie/Room2/fourth of Grandkids Galore think of it? Quite often, as adults we'll be amazed at the appalling drivel that the young reader wants read to them over and over and over and over. I'm sure many a child has learnt to read because Dad/Teacher/Granny passed out with boredom across the bed, salivating slightly and groaning, "No, no, don't make me!" so they had no option but to pick up the book and read it for themselves.

Hmm. Maybe, just maybe, it isn't drivel after all. Just maybe, that author knew what they were doing. Just maybe, they've got it right – at least for that publisher, of that type of book, for that type of kid. Later on, we'll look at this issue of who the book is for. At that point, you might want to consider the drivel.

I'd like to write for adults one day but thought I'd start with writing for children because it's easier.

Wrong. Despite what I just said above, children are the most discerning and critical of reader audiences. An adult will plough on through several pages, willing to give the author a chance, while most children (and many publishers) decide whether to carry on reading or listening after just a few lines. Furthermore, depending on the age you are writing for, you may be severely limited in the number of words you can use. With picture books, you may have only a few words per page with which to impress, so they need to earn their place.

I read my story to my children/grandchildren/niece/neighbour's dog and they loved it!

The fact that they loved it will undoubtedly be true, and when you are at the stage of finalizing your draft you will find it incredibly helpful to have some children read your story. They are unremittingly honest in letting you know where it falls down and where it grabbed their attention. However, you should take it into a local school, read it aloud at a bookshop or library, or dragoon your friends' kids in to sit on their bottoms and listen to you for half an hour, rather than using your own family for a critical appraisal.

The truth of the matter is that, usually, your young offspring and relations just love your attention. The industrial psychologist, Maslow, found that subjects in his study performed better in their jobs at that time they were being watched, simply because they knew that they were under scrutiny and someone was taking some notice of them. The same is true of your own kids. They would be happy if you read them the Financial Times, provided you popped them on your knee and sang 'China's going UP' and droned 'Polycarbonates Down' for the stock-market fluctuations. With picture books that are specifically intended for reading aloud, you should certainly try it out on a few children and their parents. Just not your own children, perhaps.

It's also a good idea to give the story to someone neutral to read aloud, and then park yourself behind them and listen to them. Where you've been naturally sliding words together or leaving dramatic pauses, the text may not give a new reader enough information to force them do the same. Their reading of your story may sound surprisingly different. Alien, even. This is particularly true of rhyme: what rhymes in your accent may sound completely different with someone else saying it; how you say '*controversy*' may work perfectly in your rhyme scheme, yet not work at all when someone else says '*controversy*'. Make sure you check.

Anyone can write a children's book!

Yeah, yeah. That old chessy.

I'm not sure if this happens if you write exclusively for adults, or newspapers, or travel journals, but I'm pretty sure that it doesn't ...

However, I promise you that you will no doubt find that whenever you mention to someone that you are writing a children's book (which you should start to try out for size regularly from now on), they will tell you, "Oh! I've got a great idea for a children's book." Furthermore, they want to tell you their great idea first, without hearing so much as a word of your completed, slaved-over and professionally edited story.

Something I've often heard when on holiday myself and telling someone what I do, is "Great! Are you going to write one while you're here?" as if it's something that can easily be done flat on my back with an ice-cream in one hand and a wailing child in the other. I'm often tempted to ask if they're going to carry out their job while they're on holiday too. "Great! You're a dentist! Are you going to be offering root canal work in Reception?"

This whole debate is along similar lines to the people who tell you they're going to write children's books 'when they retire' or 'when they've got some spare time'. There is no indication that there is any skill involved, or anything that needs to be learned. I would not dare to suggest that I am going to be a vet when I retire because I like my dog, because I know what years of training, trial and impoverished living it takes.

The suggestion always seems to be that writing a children's book is as easy and effortless as having the initial idea. It is not. You will have a million ideas a day, but if you cannot craft so much as one of them into workable text then you have not written a children's book at all. You have just had a nice thought.

"I want to be as rich and make a TV/Play/Film production out of it."

We do know that this happens. Look at *The Gruffalo* by Julia Donaldson - suddenly it's not just a book, it's a film, and then it's not just a film but a stage show, a cuddly toy, a whole merchandising brand ...

But it does only happen very occasionally, and it usually takes a great deal of time. *The Gruffalo* has been out for years. *Where the Wild Things Are* - decades. *Shrek* - many decades too.

The truth of the matter is that the picture book market is very difficult to get into in the first place, and only the sure-fire winners get selected. Then if the publisher has the knowledge and wherewithal to market it effectively, you might find it reaches some other media.

As for getting rich - well, it's always possible. However, picture book authors are paid in the same way as other authors: typically you'll receive a small 'advance' and then royalties once you've paid off the advance, which usually means when you've sold most of the books printed. There is one significant difference from the usual payment for authors, which is that your royalty (usually 10% of the price of the book) will be shared with the illustrator. You'll need to sell a whole lot of books to buy your yacht. Far better to think about the joy you're spreading to little minds and their care-givers, and reward yourself with smiles.

So these are some of the more common but perhaps less acceptable reasons for wanting to write picture books.

Even if your answers are similar to all or any of those above, however, please don't be put off. Chip away the top layers of your initial response and think about what lies behind them. It is more than likely that beneath your 'reason' sits a pure 'motive'. You can turn your reason into a positive affirmation, to be spoken like a mantra every morning as you greet the sun.

For instance, 'Writing for children is easier than writing for adults' could translate into 'I really want to write about magic, and I don't yet have the confidence to do it. Once I've read through this book and tried some writing, I'll be happy to give it a go, perhaps even for older children and then for adults.'

'I read it to my children/grandchildren/niece/neighbour's dog and they loved my story!' could actually mean 'I know I would like an audience to appreciate what I've written, so I will learn what makes the reader happy and keeps them hooked.'

‘Anyone can write a children’s book!’ could become “I have so many ideas that would make great children’s stories, but I’m not sure how to shape them. Once I know how to do that I will write them out.”

Of course, your motives for wanting to be a children’s writer may be completely contrary to what’s written here. Here are some of my own, by way of example:

#1 When I was at school, writing stories was what I did best. I want to return to what I feel was my purest instinct.

#2 I’m happiest when I’m being creative.

#3 When I’m reading, above all else I love a good STORY - a great plot with quirky characters and a satisfying end. Children’s books deliver that to me. I still read them for pleasure, and I want to follow that format.

#4 Some of my clearest memories are from my childhood, so that is my most authentic voice.

#5 I have wild, crazy ideas that only a child (or the criminally insane) could fully appreciate.

So now, have another look now at those reasons you wrote down (maybe in your special notebook!). What’s the underlying need or want or *motive* beneath that? Make a note of that, too, as soon as you recognise it. It makes a difference if what you want is an audience, or to get all these mad ideas out of your head, or you want to make millions. They’re all viable, but they affect what you write, how you write it, and what you do with it when it’s finished - and it will even affect whether you finish it or not.

And now ... let’s apply that overall wish to write to your dream of writing picture books.

What is a picture book?

A picture book, you will not be surprised to learn, is a book with pictures in it.

I should add, of course, that that’s far too simplistic a description. A book for, say, a seven year old which has lots of text divided into short chapters with an illustration every couple of pages is

not a picture book. It's a chapter book, and would be classed as junior fiction (think about Captain Underpants, Paddington Bear, How to Train Your Dragon).

Picture books tend to be formatted in a particular way, which we'll talk about in a chapter of its own, more or less, as it's so critical to understand this fact.

They are larger books, with larger print, often more evocative text and (here's the key) with *at least as much emphasis on the illustrations as the text, if not more.*

The balance between the amount of text and the amount of illustration is pretty much on a sliding scale along the age range. I often have people informing me that their picture book is for a '3 – 8' year old. Well, I have to tell you, there ain't no such beast. That's not to say that a child who loved a particular book at the age of 3 won't still love it at the age of 7, but that's possibly more to do with the cosy memory of Mum or Dad at tuck-up time, rubbing their tummy and crooning the words to them.

As mentioned earlier, picture books are specifically targeted at very narrow age-bands within that broader range:

New-born to 1

18 months to 2

2 – 3

3 – 4

4 – 5 or 6 at a stretch

5 – 6 or 7.

The proportion of illustration to text is quite age-specific too:

0-1 is 5 – 10% text, 90 – 95% illustration

1-2 is about 10% text, 90% illustration

2- 3 is 10 – 30% text, 70 – 90 % illustration

3- 4 is 20 – 40% text, 60 – 80% illustration

4 – 5 years and over, 50% text and 50% illustration

You'll note that beyond about 4 years old, there should always be a more-or-less equal division between how much the story is related through the text, and how much through the illustration.

Picture books beyond the age of 7 are usually called 'sophisticated picture books', and often contain darker or more complex themes, or are very artistically illustrated with very few words.

Whether it's right or wrong, educators and parents alike often trying to encourage children away from the picture book genre by that age. Sometimes they reach a compromise by going for a 'sophisticated' one – or nowadays, something so sophisticated that it's actually a graphic novel.

Do bear in mind, therefore, that sophisticated picture books have to be absolutely exceptional to make it into mainstream publishing, and there are relatively few people who have great success in this area. Carry on if that's where your interest lies, but do consider whether you might actually be more comfortable writing an early chapter book, or whether you could make your characters and book a little younger.

So what else is in a picture book?

A story, of course, at least in those 3+ age ranges. Below that age, there may be more use of single words or short sentences as that is targeted towards the development of the young reader. Beyond that age, there is a general acceptance that picture book are mostly fiction. As always there are exceptions to this principle (eg. Some Richard Scarry books, books about wildlife, flora, fauna, engineering feats etc) but usually there is an element of story to most picture books from age 3 onwards (and some younger than that too).

Apart from the facts above, is there any other way to define what makes a picture book?

Well, I think there is. More so than perhaps any other genre, the picture book is a conduit. It forms a three-way relationship between the book, the child, and the reader, who can be a parent,

a grandparent, an older sibling, care-giver, baby-sitter, or teacher.

That's why the 'age' column in the table above is entitled 'age of intended reader' – in most cases, the reader is not the child him/herself, but an adult or older person conducting the story through themselves to the child, all with their own personal embellishments, funny voices and eye-rolling demonstrations. It's important to remember this fact, so you don't forget to target the piece to the intended reader, ie the child, at the same time as allowing the actual reader to become part of the story-telling magic.

It's a triangle. Author at the top. Intended reader (child) bottom right. Actual reader (adult) bottom left.

The ideal point to aim at is probably somewhere along that bottom axis, where you're appealing to the child and the person who's reading it to them in equal measure. This is sometimes a good test once you've written your picture book and you're casting a critical eye at it: try seeing it in your 'triangle' and work out who you're actually appealing to most. It could actually be you, at the pinnacle of the triangle! That may not be wrong, of course, but it could mean that although it's a book with pictures, it may still be quite adult in concept and delivery.

Think back, too, to those 'appalling drivels' books we mentioned before. Are they really hopeless? Or do they appeal entirely to the Intended Reader on the right of that bottom axis? It could simply be that the author had no intention of satisfying you, the adult reader, and only wanted to make Freddie/Room 2/Fourth of Grandkids Galore laugh until their nose exploded, or stick their thumb in their mouth and gum the word 'Again' at you. Food for thought.

What a picture book is not ...

There are so many erroneous assumptions about picture books, picture book writing, and picture book writers, that I wanted to list out a few of the most common offenders. Forewarned is fore-armed, so they say. This is to arm you, so you can either ward off the nay-sayers who will inevitably launch their attack the minute you mention what you're up to, or so you can avoid

making these same assumptions yourself.

Repeat after me. A picture book is not ...

#1 A short story with pictures.

I've done many workshops and assessments with people who tell me they've written a picture book, when in fact what they've written is a short story. Often they are very sweet short stories, and would look pretty with a few pictures tickling their borders, but they are still not picture books.

The main issue with most of these short stories is that they are just too wordy, because the writer uses their extensive and glorious vocabulary to describe all sorts of things that should be shown in the illustrations. That's not the only issue, by any means, but the most common one! If you're going to start with a short story, that's fine, but be prepared to take a large and brutal hatchet to it afterwards.

#2 This wonderful incident that happened to my grandchild/nephew/next-door-neighbour

Okay. It may be a wonderful story. I don't know the particular tale with which you've enthralled the neighbourhood. But please do bear in mind that it's just as likely, if not perhaps a little more probable, that certain elements of the amazing incident might only be amazing to you or your nearest and dearest. Like the saying, 'I guess you had to be there'.

The trick with using real incidents is to take the core 10 - 20% of it that probably was entertaining/educational/poignant/hilarious and then embellish it madly. It's the old 80/20 rule. That way you can be sure you are appealing to the readers on that bottom line of the triangle that goes between the child and the adult reading the book, rather than mostly satisfying the person perched on the triangle's tiny top ... (yes, you. The author).

#3 Just like an Aesop's fable.

Picture books do not have to have a 'message'. They can, for sure, but they don't need one to make them a great picture book. If they do have one it should be subtly blended into the story so that it might just occur to the child a few weeks later that 'oh! This is just like in Panda's Pants! I just need to say to Joany that I ...' or whatever. It does not need to be, in fact, should not ever be, underlined in fluorescent pink and indelibly printed on the child's mind. It's fine just to entertain them, evoke whatever emotion you wish to evoke, and let them work it out for themselves.

I should also point out at this juncture that there is a difference between picture books for the 'trade' market, ie the booksellers, and the educational market. Educational books do tend to have a theme or message, and they will also have recommended words to use, the number of times to use them, and words to avoid. If you want your picture books to 'teach' children about certain things, then everything you learn here can still apply, but you will also need to find out the strict guidelines for writing for schools.

#4 Easy to write.

No. Oh no. And again no. For writers, many of whom love words and language, they are often the hardest books to write. You need to get a whole story along with several characters and their personal development into less than 1000 words - significantly less, if you can manage it.

Kave-Tina Rox, who features on the cover of this book, started at 1200 in its long (and not terribly good) version, came down to 800 for submission to the publisher, and ended up at just over 600 after my editor and I did battle over a few choice phrases. I'm delighted with the end result, but it became ever clearer to me how much one must make every word count in a picture book, and if it doesn't count, out it goes. It's a harsh world out there in picture book land.

5 A simple little book

Picture books are more layered, more collaborative, more painstakingly thought through than any other book in publication, to my mind. Enough said.

6 Sort of poems because they rhyme

They don't all rhyme. They shouldn't all rhyme. Often the best ones do not rhyme, although many of the memorable ones do (Dr Seuss and so on).

Also, just because they rhyme, it does not make them poetry. Sometimes poems can make great picture books, but it is not necessarily the case that the way to make a picture book great is to make it rhyme.

There are various reasons publishers and editors do not really like people submitting rhyming picture books, the main arguments being that rhyme is hard to translate which makes it harder to sell the book overseas, but the other being that ... I'm sorry, there's no way to say this other than just to come out with it again ... most people can't do it. Even people who think they can do it often can't do it. And when it's not done properly, it kills the story completely and instantly.

This is such an important issue that we will devote a whole chapter to it later on!

There you are, then. A few responses for the legions of people who, when you tell them you're writing a picture book, will look you brazenly in the eye and inform you that they're going to write one too, the very next time they have three minutes to spare and the back of a beer mat to write on.

Be proud. Stand up for picture books. And write them right.

SOMETHING TO TRY

LIST FIVE DISCOVERIES YOU'VE MADE ABOUT PICTURE BOOKS.

NOW LIST FIVE KEY AREAS YOU THINK YOU MAY FOCUS ON NOW, TO CREATE A WONDERFUL PICTURE BOOK.

Hopefully, the topics you want to focus on are covered in one or more of the upcoming chapters. Then you'll have ample opportunity to gather an idea for your story, work out the structure, populate it with some fabulous characters, decide to rhyme or not to rhyme, lay it all out beautifully with instructions for the illustrator, and maybe send it off for a competition or to a publisher.

SO NOW I'D LIKE YOU TO JOT DOWN ALL THOSE IDEAS YOU'VE BEEN HAVING OVER THE YEARS - THE ONES YOU JUST KNEW WOULD MAKE A BRILLIANT PICTURE BOOK.

That's fantastic. Now you've set yourself up for the next chapter, where we'll be taking those ideas and beginning to play around with them (remember, 80/20!) to turn those first thoughts into viable picture book plans.

And here's your very, very final exercise for this chapter. It's the toughest one, and you may not be able to do it yet, but if you can force yourself you will feel extremely good about the wonderful challenge ahead of you.

It is simply this. FIND ONE PERSON YOU TRUST, AND TELL THEM IN WORDS TO THIS EFFECT: "I'VE FINALLY DONE IT. I'M WRITING A PICTURE BOOK."

Congratulations. You're on the way.

Summary

Understanding why you want to write picture books helps you to target your writing more effectively, and enjoy it thoroughly while you're doing it.

Picture book writing is one of the most challenging forms of fiction to write, but the rewards are enormous - although they may not always be financial.

There are small, practical steps that we can take to understand how picture books are created, and those will lead to a polished manuscript and a far better chance of getting work accepted.

Writing for children can be more difficult than people imagine, and it deserves as much proper attention and discipline as any other form of writing.

Chapter 2: Here's an idea

CREATING IDEAS

In the last chapter, we talked about what a picture book is and is not. It is a heavily-illustrated book, yet it's not a short story with pictures. Hopefully you'll have had opportunity to mull that over since we mentioned it in Chapter 1. Perhaps you've even picked up a few picture books and read them through, just to remind yourself what they actually consist of.

Regardless of what fiction you're writing, however - whether it is a short story or a picture book, or even a novel the length of War and Peace - it all starts with the same thing. The same little thing.

An idea.

A tiny germ of a notion that starts to build and take shape like some kind of animorph, gathering substance until it's more than just a glimmer. It's a gleam. It's a whole skein of silver thread. And fine, it might be a tad jumbled and unclear at present, but what you have is the very beginning of a story.

If it doesn't ever make it to the page (in your notebook, on the computer, and eventually, if good luck prevails, in a published volume) then it remains just what it is.

An idea.

However, it really doesn't take very much to begin to translate that initial thought into a delightful story that children - and their readers in that triangle we discussed in the last chapter - will adore.

So what are you going to write *about*?

Now, you may already have your idea in mind. That might be why you picked up this book, in fact. In which case, that's great. It's very likely that your idea will have come from something you experienced - saw, overheard, did yourself, went through as a child or with your own kids. Good, because that's pretty much where all our ideas come from.

Picture books, however, are far more complex layered than most people realise. When you're writing about a kid who's found a snail, it might seem to the young reader (and the old reader. And maybe even the author!) that what you're writing about is a kid who's found a snail.

It's very likely, though, that what you're *really* writing about is something else.

In fact, let's just pause there and actually do this. In your notebook, write a very short piece about a kid who's found a snail. It doesn't matter what kid, and it doesn't matter what kind of snail. Let your imagination roam freely!

Have you done that? Good. Here's my story about a kid who's found a snail. It might be similar to yours, or it might be completely different. Don't worry; anything goes!

Barney watched sadly as his mum packed up his special duvet cover with Buzz Lightyear on it. "Why do we have to move, Mummy?" he said.

"Because Daddy has a new job," said Mummy. "It will be very exciting."

But Barney liked his old house. He liked his old gnarly apple tree in the garden. And he liked his bedroom, stuffed full of his favourite things.

So when the removal van came and Mummy put their suitcases in her car, Barney ran out to the garden.

And he HID.

Under the bushes, he found a worm. "You don't have to leave your home, Worm, do you?" said Barney crossly.

The worm didn't answer. It just slithered under a leaf, and disappeared down a hole. It looked very damp and cold.

Barney shivered. Then he scrummaged further into the bush so Mummy wouldn't find him, even when he heard her calling.

On the bark of a tree, he found a beetle. "Lucky Beetle," said Barney. "I bet nobody ever packs up your favourite duvet."

But the beetle just took to its eight feet, scuttling up the tree trunk until it disappeared into the rain. Without an umbrella. Barney wondered just where Beetle's duvet might be, and then he realised that beetles probably don't have cosy blankets.

He sniffed, and squeezed behind the tree until he was next to the shed.

"Barney, where are you?" called Mummy.

"I'm not here!" he shouted back. He was not going to go to some silly old other house when he could stay in this perfectly nice one.

Just then he felt something squelchy. A frog! He'd nearly put his hand on it.

"What are you doing here, Frog? We don't have a pond."

The frog just croaked at him, and bounded away to the bird bath under the apple tree. Poor Frog, thought Barney. He didn't even have his own home to live in. He had to use someone else's.

"Barney, where are you?" shouted Mummy.

Quick, hide! Barney thought, and he scampered into the shed. This was his shed. He could live in here. Although it was a bit cobwebby. And it smelled funny. And there was a strange scratchy stretch sound at the window.

As he huddled behind the wheelbarrow, just a teensy bit frightened, Barney spied another creature.

It was a snail.

A sweet little snail, slurping up the side of the plant pot.

Snail, carrying his home on his back.

"Barney, where are you?" yelled Mummy again. She sounded very cross and a little bit scared.

Barney watched Snail. Snail watched Barney. All at once, Barney knew what the snail was doing. It was moving house. With its shell on its back, cosy and warm and dry and not scared, it

had packed up its home and was moving to somewhere new and comfortable, where the other snails lived.

“Thank you, Snail!” he said as he jumped up.

He ran outside, up the path and out to the removal van.

Mummy looked very worried, and shouted “Barney, where are you?” just as Barney popped up beside her.

“Here I am!” he said.

Mummy gave him a hug. “Are you ready to move to our new house?”

And he really was, because he knew that home was wherever his toys, and Mummy and Daddy, and his special Buzz Lightyear duvet happened to be.

“I can’t wait,” said Barney with a big happy smile.

And off they went.

So there is story about a kid who’s found a snail. It may be very different to your own, or it may not. It may be very similar, because, of course, one of the things that everyone knows about snails, no matter how young they are, is that they carry their home on their back. So you too may have made that leap from ‘kid with snail’ to ‘home on back’ and therefore made it something to do with moving house.

The point here is that picture books tend to be ‘about’ several things at once. On one level we have the situation (in this case, Barney finding different creatures). At another level we have a setting or a scenario that is familiar to children of this age (about four years old, I would suggest). Here in the Barney story, the setting is his familiar old garden. Underlying all of those elements, we have a ‘theme’, and it might be deemed that this is really what the story is ‘about’. It’s about home. It’s about change. It’s about someone being sad because they’re leaving behind everything they know.

This is the make-up for most picture books. Not all, but most. On the surface, there is the ‘situation’ in which the story is taking place. This is quite a straightforward story, but the ‘situation’ could be very funny, or mad, or scary, or unusual, or just downright beautiful.

In the middle layer is a 'setting', which will somehow be familiar to the child reader, and will depend to a degree on the age of the child reader for whom the book is intended. It might be the beach, the playground, Grandma's, pre-school or school. Then, down at the heart of it, there will be a 'theme' or something universal that underpins the whole story and somehow makes it richer.

My own published picture book - I'm distinguishing here because I have so many more that are not published - is exactly the same beneath the surface, although the two stories couldn't appear to be more different. KAVE-TINA ROX is a cave-girl who has too much terrible hair but discovers she can do clever things with it (**situation**). The '**setting**' is the Caveman Games coming to town - which is like the park to children who are not of the dinosaur era. Down at the heart of it, Kave-Tina is following her brother around trying to get him to allow her to join in, and not succeeding, so the universal '**theme**' is brothers and sisters trying to get along, perhaps even edging into sibling rivalry.

What you will tend to find, if we refer again to the triangular nature of the picture book relationship between author, child reader and adult reader, is that the **situation** is often what appeals most to the child: pirates who've lost their Skull-and-Crossbones, fairies who need a special dress for the 'come as a human' fancy dress party and so on.

The **setting** will provide a common ground for the adult reader and the child reader, with something they can both relate to.

The '**theme**', however, is for the adult reader, so that they can explain universal issues to the child in a kind, oblique way. How much it is spelled out and done in a 'messagey' way is down to the author at the tip of the triangle.

So can you see how this works?

Think of it like this: if a care-giver of some kind were to go into a bookshop because something was going on in a child's life, they would not go in and ask for a book about a boy with a snail (situation). They'd ask for a book about moving home and dealing with change (theme). Whether

they go for Barney and the Snail or Puddle the Alien Tries a New Spaceship will depend, to a point, on how comfortable they think both they, the adult reader, and the child reader will be with the setting.

The child reader, on the other hand, will be drawn to the 'situation' that appeals to them most. In fact, the child probably won't care at all about the setting or the theme, and will gravitate to the one that looks most fun, or cute, or bug-infested - depending on their age and gender. Again, we're back to that bottom axis on the triangle. Who is this book written for? We do have to remember occasionally that while it's intended for the toddler/pre-schooler/baby, it won't be that child who is buying the book or seeking it out on the library shelves ...

However, I suppose the lesson in this (theme?) is that if you want to appeal to the child most of all, don't worry about the theme or the setting at all, and concentrate entirely on the situation. You only need to look at the success of *Wonky Donkey* by Craig Smith, and *Baa Baa Smart Sheep* by Mark and Rowan Sommerset to see situation usage in full swing! Or try *The Story of the Little Mole Who Knew It Was None of His Business* (hint: I couldn't remember the title of this book, so I googled 'Mole with poo on its head' and it took me straight to Amazon).

Right. Have another read of your own 'kid with snail' story now. What's the situation?

What setting did you choose?

And what might be the universal theme at the heart of it all?

Great. Hopefully by now you can see that you can play around with theme, setting and situation with special consideration for who you want to appeal to most, and what message (if any) you want to get across. You can put them in a funnel or grinder and see what pops out of the bottom!

Bear in mind that the themes tend to cut across all age groups: loneliness, finding friends, being anxious, not liking certain foods, liking all foods, manners, reading, learning, growing ... What others can you think of?

Settings, on the other hand, can be universally appealing (caveman games, the Wild West, Rugby Finals, the moon) or they can be geared towards the universe that the child might live in at that age - bathtime and bedtime for babies, going to Grandma's for two year olds, beach/park/playground for three year olds, pre-school/parties/play-dates for four year olds, school/junior sports/ballet for five year olds.

Situations, and the characters you might use in them, tend to wax and wane in popularity according to the age and gender of the child. Even though we may not like it and we might try to break stereotypes, it is absolutely true that girls gravitate towards pink and sparky princess stories and boys like bugs, dinosaurs and mud. But not necessarily at the same age. The division in gender interests tends to come at or just before three years old when the world the children themselves inhabit are diversifying somewhat, and it looks something like this:

Girls

2 ½ to 3 ½ Cute animals, fairies

3 ½ to 4 ½ Fairies, princesses, girl pirates

4 ½ to 5 ½ Mermaids, cats and dogs, fairies (and cave girls, I like to think ...)

Boys

2 ½ to 3 ½ Dinosaurs, trucks

3 ½ to 4 ½ Bugs, monsters, pirates

4 ½ to 5 ½ Aliens, dirt, toilets, poo

This is generalising, of course, and not all children conform to these, but after working as a bookseller, writing for children, and speaking with kids in schools over many years (as well as being a parent!), I can swear, hand on heart, that this is the norm.

You may have more **theme** ideas yourself. If you don't already have a steady flow of ideas, however, I'm going to introduce you to the way I generate every single one of my ideas for

books short or long, old or young, simple or complex. It's a construct you hear many times in the film world, with many film premises and pitches starting with these very words.

Just two little words that spark of stories worldwide, for time immemorial.

WHAT IF?

That's it. What if. From those two tiny words have sprung every single one of my books, and other authors' books world-wide. Here's how it works: you observe something ordinary, and then you ask yourself, 'What if that wasn't ordinary? What if it wasn't what I'm seeing or hearing or smelling or sensing at all? What if it was completely different to expectations?'

And remember when you're writing children's books especially, that 'completely different' can be as wild, whacky and out there as you like!

For Kave-Tina Rox, the 'situation' was sparked by one of the many times I was trying to get a hairbrush through my daughter's knotty thatch of hair. She had the kind of hair that would cause strangers to stop in the street and paw at her head, declaring 'Oh, isn't she gorgeous? Look at that hair!' (Nowadays they still do that, but they're seventeen year old boys, and I have to punch them). These poor, deluded strangers, though. They had no idea about the four hours of battle we'd done before leaving the house, and just how long I'd had to look at that bird's nest, wondering how to attack it. And that was before the nits turned up.

What if, I thought one day after a particularly tedious fight, we could actually find some point to this hair. What if there was something *useful* that could be done with it. I stared into space. And what if this girl with the hair was like Rapunzel but was inventive and feisty ... and what if she used it to invent things that were not invented at that time ... and ... and what if that time was so long ago it was when pre-historic?

And so Kave-Tina was born. A cave girl who invents things to do with her hair. That was my situation. I had an idea of setting – obviously it would be caveman days, but with something

special going on involving sports and game. Then I discovered that she was to have an older brother - Dave-Kave - whom she would be desperate to play with but never allowed.

And there it was. My picture book.

I will confess to you, though, that when I first sat down and wrote it, it came out like a short story which would need pictures. It was too long, too complicated, and too old for the picture book audience. The ‘what if’ - the situation, setting and theme – still fitted a younger audience, and so I set to and started cutting out words. Less than 1000, remember? Before too long, Kave-Tina Rox was more or less in the shape that it appears in as a picture book, only without the pictures.

So it just shows that it’s possible to come up with a picture book idea from a huge variety of situations. I do have a very potent imagination, but then it’s now been trained in a million ‘what if’ moments so that hardly a day goes by when I don’t have a new idea for a story. It makes me very nosy, so I might lean in a bit too close to some stranger’s conversation. Sometimes I go into a trance while I’m what-iffing, and the person who gave me the idea thinks I’m staring at them for no good reason. But other than that, generally I find it an incredibly useful process.

Notice as well, as with the ‘girl does something with hair’ example, I didn’t just stop at one ‘what if’. I keep on what-iffing, stretching out the whole silly scenario with what-if after what-if, until I’ve sometimes generated the plan for a whole book in minutes.

So the process is ‘What if this’ followed by ‘then what if it ... and then what if they ... and then what if the thing and the people do ...’ And so it goes on.

Eg 1. What if a hairy girl finds her hair grows down to the floor ... and what if she gets the kitchen scissors and cuts it off, and ... what if ... she hurts her ear, and ... Oh. That’s not going to be very nice for kids. Girl does a Van Gogh. Not good for picture books. Can’t think of anything else.

Eg 2 What if a hairy girl ... can do anything with her hair ... like, fly! And then what if one day it gets cut off, and suddenly, she can't fly any more, and what if ... she's trapped in a dungeon by an evil sorcerer because of her amazing hair ... oh, hang on, she hasn't got it any more. Um. What if he's waiting for her to grow it again, kind of like Rapunzel in reverse? Darn. That's a bit boring after such an exciting start.

Eg 3 What if a hairy girl ... can make things with her hair. And what if she can make things in a time when there aren't any things, like caveman times! Gosh. What if she could invent modern day things with her hair, in a caveman setting, that help her escape things. She's like Cave-Girl MacGyver. And what if ... what if ... she invents a football, and plays with her brother and his mates. And what if ... she invents a flying fox! Yes! And what if she ... rescues the annoying brother with her hair! Okay, yes, and what if ...

Once you've accumulated a stock of ideas, you'll start to recognise that some of them are better than others. Some just seem more sustainable, or allow you to complete a story without hitting a brick wall in the middle. You'll note from my own 'hairy girl' example that the 'tries to cut and hurts head' story wasn't really going anywhere, and I didn't know how that would end without alienating my audience. The 'loses power' story had more traction, and could have gone somewhere but couldn't match the dynamism of the opening, so that petered out too.

This is what often happens: the ideas with legs will just pour out and feel whole in some way. It's not a coincidence that publishers will say they knew they had a great book on their hands when the hairs all stood up on the back of their neck, or they got goose-pimples up their arms, or they shivered. Great ideas cause physical reactions.

I feel it in my solar plexus, right in my core - a burst of heat and light that creates that shudder. Or I find I can't stop smiling while I'm reading the story, whether it's mine or someone else's. When I finish a great book that I'm hoping to or about to publish, I'll often shout 'Yesssss!' and punch the air, and then will praise the gods that this author stumbled across my path.

You'll find your own way to trust your instincts, and discover which ideas warrant further investigation and which should be shelved.

For now.

You might bring them back out again one day.

So now we're at the end of Chapter 2. You've begun to begin. If you'd like to try more beginnings, just go back and do more 'what ifs', or go to my Youtube channel for a special little 'What If' video just for you to do a little more homework.

In the next chapter, we're going to move on from gathering basic ideas together to structuring them for a really enjoyable, well-plotted reading experience for all concerned. You'll be able to apply this to as many stories as you like, so feel free to keep writing more!

SOMETHING TO TRY

You can what-if with everyday objects, events and people you see around you in our daily life. You can also do it with newspaper headlines and articles, things you overhear, something your kids bring home from school, a billboard or noticeboard. Have a go with one or more of these, or find your own example and What If with it.

#1 One boy to another. 'Smell my socks.' But he's not wearing any ...

#2 On a church noticeboard: 'PEWS FOR SALE. HARDLY WORN.'

#3 Newspaper headline: MEASLES IN THE MOVIES

Hopefully this will generate heaps of ideas, and if you know of any other ways to create ideas then go with the flow - it might be walking in nature, or staring into a candle, or gazing up at the clouds.

Okay, so that's what-iffing.

Now for the story itself. Find one of the what-ifs that gives you a physical reaction, that just feels right, somehow.

You've already written one little story with the kid and the snail. Next, in your notebook or exercise paper, write a second story based on your what-iffery.

On your marks, get set ... GO!

WONDERFUL! Well done, you have now started writing a book. It may not be the book you continue with, or follow through to the end to shape for illustrations, but you have started a story, and that's fantastic. Congratulations, you are definitely now a writer!

SUMMARY

Generating ideas can feel difficult, yet until you've committed some to paper in some way, you're not going to know by seeing and feeling how well they will work. And until you've written it somehow, it's still just an idea.

Picture books can appeal to all the people in the picture book triangle - the author, the child and the adult reader - by combining a situation, a setting and a theme.

How much you have of any of those three elements - situation, setting and theme - will dictate what kind of picture book you're writing.

Themes are universal and don't change much according to age; settings can be universal or they may relate to the age of the child, and situations are often specifically appealing to a particular age and/or gender.

You can gather ideas for stories from anywhere, but a great way to see new stories everywhere is to use the 'What If?' technique to take something ordinary, and imagine how it could be if it was not ordinary at all.

The ideas with 'legs' are the ones that are worth pursuing. It won't always happen in this way, and sometimes you'll persevere with a story even when it doesn't give you this feeling, especially early in your writing career. For me, the stories with legs evoke a physical reaction of some kind. Watch out for your own.

Chapter 3 Plotters with Trotters

In this chapter, I want to help you take some of those ideas and story drafts that you generated in the last chapter and turn them into satisfying picture books. This technique will also assist you in overcoming some of the following difficulties which you may have experienced already:

When you started to jot your ideas down, it was a little difficult to sketch out a story without knowing where it was going;

It started off fantastically well but you had no idea how to wrap it all up and end it;

It got boring in the middle, so to sort it out you added something amazing but it suddenly seemed out of place running next to the boring middle;

You thought it would be just one main character but suddenly you ended up with dozens and it was impossible to keep control of them all;

Or you may have had other issues with the structure or plot-line. Well, hopefully this technique that I'm about to introduce you to will deal with all of those plotting difficulties - and even help you with your emails, longer stories, speeches, kids' speeches at school, presentations for work and so on.

But plotters with trotters? Has the woman gone mad? I can hear you thinking it, honestly. And it's quite possible I have. Years of living in one's head and/or fantasy land can do that to a person!

Even so, there is method in my madness.

I want you to know the easiest way to plot out a picture book effectively and enticingly. Once you've been introduced to it, you will never forget it again. And you'll find it remarkably straightforward to spin out a perfectly structured picture book in no time at all. A 'situation'

broken down into this format can take you from 0 words to 999 words (that is, just below 1000) before you know it.

Actually, this is a plotting technique I use in all my writing whatever the word-count - for big books and small, for old books and young, for complex and simple. It's a structure that simplifies the writing process for you, the author, but remains hidden to the reader, so that they are completely unaware that you have arranged this story in a certain order, with certain tools, just to maximise its appeal for them.

It's a narrative device which you will probably have absorbed from your reading so that it feels instinctively correct. What you won't have realised as a reader is that the author knew about this technique before you. See, it really does make reading satisfying and fun, doesn't it?

The reason I call it 'plotters with trotters' is that this structural plotting device is found in stories of all types, is definitely evident in most if not all fairy-tales and traditional storytelling, and is most clearly shown in one particular story that's familiar to us all: the tale of The Three Little Pigs.

THE THREE LITTLE PIGS PLOTTING TECHNIQUE

Just as reminder of what happens in The Three Little Pigs:

The three little pigs live together at Mummy Pig's house. For some reason they have to leave. The first little pig builds himself a house of straw. The wolf comes along, and he HUFFS and he PUFFS and he BLOWS THE HOUSE DOWN.

(Kids love joining in with this part, and that's because delivering information or speech or displaying things in *threes* works really well. Give it a go in your dialogue, or your speeches and presentations! Politicians do it all the time ...)

Anyway, back to our little pigs.

The house of straw is destroyed, so the first little pig runs to the second little pig who builds his house of sticks. The wolf comes along, and he HUFFS and he PUFFS and he BLOWS THE HOUSE DOWN.

The house of sticks is destroyed, so the two little pigs run to the third little pig.

The third little pig builds his house of bricks. The wolf comes along, and he HUFFS and he PUFFS and he CAN'T BLOW THE HOUSE DOWN.

So he climbs up the chimney. At the bottom of the chimney is a boiling pot, and depending on the version you know, the wolf burns his bottom and runs off, or sometimes he falls in and is eaten. In the seven-year-old boy version, somehow EVERYBODY DIES!!

Whichever version you're familiar with, the pattern and the outcome is roughly the same, so that after the wolf is somehow dispatched, the three little pigs live together in the brick house. And how do they live?

Happily. Ever. After.

Visually, this looks like this:

Home LEAVE! 1 pig 2 pig 3 pig CHIMNEY Home

The first thing you may notice is that the end looks identical to the beginning, but the reader knows that everything has changed. This pleasing circularity is a very common feature of books (and film too) - where the ending appears to be very much like the beginning, but the character has overcome a number of challenges and is completely different, and has got the girl, turned their rags to riches, won the war and so on.

If the issue you outlined earlier in the chapter was that you had no idea how to end your story, then it's useful to remember that you can have the same setting and the same kind of event as your beginning, but you're going to have to show that while it looks the same, it's actually very different.

Back to our three little pigs. They're happily at home, and then they have to leave. This departure is the catalyst for the story, sometimes known as the bomb because it explodes and throws normality or routine into chaos. Everything prior to the bomb has been the routine your characters lived with. The bomb is the interruption to that routine.

In a picture book, your catalyst or bomb is likely to be the 'situation' that sparks the rest of the story, which could range from Pirate Polly losing her skull-and-crossbones, to Freddie losing his gerbil, to some terrible relative coming to stay.

Next, we have what might be described as a peak of activity. The first house is built, small and weak, with the pig trying to defend himself against the challenge in the story but failing. Driven back down to basics, he has to gather his forces again and head off to the next challenge.

With the second little pig, we have another peak of activity, bigger than the previous one but still not big enough. Back down they go, then head off to face a bigger challenge still. The brick house provides a third peak of activity, bigger and better than both the previous two, but still not quite enough!

And then we have the chimney event, where the cleverness of the characters thwarts the baddy, and the climax of the story all takes place to lead to a satisfactory conclusion.

But it's still not quite the end, because the pigs have still to re-group, reflect on their success, and show that they have matured enough because of the challenges they've faced and beaten to live together in their own home.

Visually, this looks like this:

Beginning Bomb Peak1 Peak2 Peak3 CHIMNEY End

This is a simple, workable structure that enables you to be guided through your story, knowing you have: enough peaks and troughs to cut out the boring bits; enough down-time for the readers - both adult and child on either side of that triangle - to reflect on what's gone on, and maybe stop for a little chat along the lines of 'Gosh, that wasn't very clever of first little pig, was it?'

You'll also have information on what they need to do better, and a satisfying upward clamber to the all-important 'chimney event' where the denouement/climax/exposition/final fight is going to take place in one wonderful triumphant revelation that makes the readers cheer for their heroes and heroines - or nod knowingly, or smile at each other with doe eyes (one pair of which are hopefully closing by this stage ...).

All of this is sandwiched between a beginning and end that look the same but are remarkably different.

So how do you apply this to your planning process? Again, it will depend on how much of work you want to do up-front, before the fun creative part begins and you start writing. You might want to plot your story just like the diagrams above, with a word or two per peak and chimney event.

For instance, let's imagine you were writing a story about a kid who finds a snail.

It could go like this:

Young James finds a snail. He follows it across the garden for several pages and then stops when the snail stops. The snail has stopped because it's going to start nibbling on something instead of sliming on something. James watches for several pages. The snail just eats, then James realises he's hungry too and some delicious smell is wafting from the kitchen, so he goes home.

In visual depiction it would look like this:

Finds snail **Follows snail** Snail eats a leaf Boy hungry and goes home

Well, that would hardly be the most interesting story in the world, would it? As you can see from the visual line, 'snail eating leaf' is less interesting than 'snail trailing across garden'. I think the reader might decide they're hungry just about the time the snail starts eating the leaf. Then your reader will probably go off in search of popcorn, put the TV on and think about what Spongebob would do if he followed a snail. MUCH more fascinating.

What about this, though?

Eg1 Moving house HIDES worm beetle frog **SNAIL** Moving house

Again, it may not be the most fascinating story ever, but it's going to keep the reader involved - hopefully - to the end of the story. I hope it kept you involved to the end of the story, because it's the one I put in the last chapter.

This is exactly how I planned it (although by now this happens fairly instinctively for me):

Eg2

Opening - A boy moving house

Catalyst - He didn't want to go so he ran off and hid

1st peak - He found a worm and thought that looked fun, but on closer inspection the worm's home looked cold and damp

2nd peak - He found a beetle (a bigger creature than the first) on a tree and thought that looked like freedom, but then he realised that the beetle had no special duvet

3rd peak - He found a frog (a bigger creature than the second which was a bigger creature than the first) and liked how it hopped, but then he discovered the frog had no pond and had to live in the bird bath

CHIMNEY - In the shed, he watched a snail glide up a plant pot carrying his house. Aha! The snail is happy because its home is where the heart is. And while it's not a bigger creature than any of the others, it's a very big realisation

End -A boy moving house. Looks the same but everything is different. He's happy!

So then this: Moving house HIDES worm beetle frog **SNAIL** Moving house

Becomes this:

Barney watched sadly as his mum packed up his special duvet cover with Buzz Lightyear on it.

"Why do we have to move, Mummy?" he said.

"Because Daddy has a new job," said Mummy. "It will be very exciting."

But Barney liked his old house. He liked his old gnarly apple tree in the garden. And he liked his bedroom, stuffed full of his favourite things.

So when the removal van came and Mummy put their suitcases in her car, Barney ran out to the garden.

And he HID.

Under the bushes, he found a worm. "You don't have to leave your home, Worm, do you?" said Barney crossly.

The worm didn't answer. It just slithered under a leaf, and disappeared down a hole. It looked very damp and cold.

Barney shivered. Then he scummaged further into the bush so Mummy wouldn't find him, even when he heard her calling. On the bark of a tree, he found a beetle. "Lucky Beetle," said Barney. "I bet nobody ever packs up your favourite duvet."

But the beetle just took to its eight feet, scuttling up the tree trunk until it disappeared into the rain. Without an umbrella. Barney wondered just where Beetle's duvet might be, and then he realised that beetles probably don't have cosy blankets.

He sniffed, and squeezed behind the tree until he was next to the shed.

"Barney, where are you?" called Mummy.

"I'm not here!" he shouted back. He was not going to go to some silly old other house when he could stay in this perfectly nice one.

Just then he felt something squelchy. A frog! He'd nearly put his hand on it.

"What are you doing here, Frog? We don't have a pond."

The frog just croaked at him, and bounded away to the bird bath under the apple tree. Poor Frog, thought Barney. He didn't even have his own home to live in. He had to use someone else's.

"Barney, where are you?" shouted Mummy.

Quick, hide! Barney thought, and he scampered into the shed. This was his shed. He could live in here. Although it was a bit cobwebby. And it smelled funny. And there was a strange scratchy scratch sound at the window.

As he huddled behind the wheelbarrow, just a teensy bit frightened, Barney spied another creature.

It was a snail.

A sweet little snail, slurping up the side of the plant pot.

Snail, carrying his home on his back.

"Barney, where are you?" yelled Mummy again. She sounded very cross and a little bit scared.

Barney watched Snail. Snail watched Barney. All at once, Barney knew what the snail was doing. It was moving house. With its shell on its back, cosy and warm and dry and not scared, it had packed up its home and was moving to somewhere new and comfortable, where the other snails lived.

"Thank you, Snail!" he said as he jumped up.

He ran outside, up the path and out to the removal van.

Mummy looked very worried, and shouted "Barney, where are you?" just as Barney popped up beside her.

“Here I am!” he said.

Mummy gave him a hug. “Are you ready to move to our new house?”

And he really was, because he knew that home was wherever his toys, and Mummy and Daddy, and his special Buzz Lightyear duvet happened to be.

“I can’t wait,” said Barney with a big happy smile.

And off they went.

Simple, yes? And I do assure you, I use this technique for all my books, from Kave-Tina Rox to the very adult book, *The Most Beautiful Man in the World*, which is 90,000 words, in four different voices, over three distinct decades.

Kave-Tina certainly follows this pattern, with the beginning and end both using these words:

I’m Kave-Tina Rox, with scrunches in my bunches

And I throw them over my shoulder, on my boulder, eating Krunchees

Then there’s an introduction to the family, a catalyst in the form of the Caveman Games coming to town, three activities each growing in size and difficulty, a ‘chimney’ event which does actually involve a fire, and then the ending that looks exactly like the beginning, but Kave-Tina is now satisfied with her lot. Writers often worry that this will seem formulaic and obvious, but the fact is that if you construct it properly, nobody ever notices the structure behind the story. Great writing is invisible to the naked eye. And besides, kids love having a bit of structure in their life ...

THE TWIST IN THE TAIL

Of course, pigs have curly tails. Corkscrews. With a little twist at the end. And so it is with picture books: once you’ve used the three little pigs technique to plot and write your story, you can add a little twist which is really just a little joke between you and the reader. You’re saying

to them: ‘Ha! Those silly characters might think it’s the end of the story, but really it isn’t. Look!’

The reason you would say ‘look’ is that more often than not the twist in the tail of the tale is pictorial. In other words, it isn’t mentioned in text, it’s just shown in an illustration.

It could be the monster that everyone has assured Joanna does not live under the bed, showing that in fact it lives in the laundry instead. How about the polar bear who takes his fur off, hangs it up at the end of the day, and puts on a brown dressing gown to become a grizzly? Or even a teddy bear? You’ll see examples of this type of twist in many picture books.

For Barney and the Snail, it could be funny picture of the snail going off to its own removal van and actually being a slug who is moving house. This would change the tone of the book somewhat, and perhaps make it more funny and quirky than comforting and soft, so in this case I might choose to leave out the twist in the tale. But if I wanted a wink to the reader, I could play around with an idea like that.

In the chapter on illustration, I’ll tell you how I would let the illustrator know about that if it was something I definitely wanted to be a part of the book.

Another plotting technique for picture books

Many, indeed most picture books work very well with the three little pigs plotting technique. However, there is another simple device that is along the same lines and lends itself to a different type of story - often less story-based and may often be founded around a song or nursery rhyme. An example would be ‘Going on a bear hunt’.

The technique is to use three or more things (often five) increasing in size/scale/drama up to about the **middle** of the book, and then use the same things again only decreasing in size back down to the end of the book. To use a bear hunt as an example, it could look like this:

Home; grass; bushes; quicksand; cave ... LION! Cave; quicksand; bushes; grass; home.

In other words, you would use the same things, only decreasing in size and in reverse order, to back out of the story to the end that looks like the beginning.

You should note that the pace for the first half is a little different to the second 'half'. In 'Going on a lion hunt,' we repeat a cushioning phrase between each of the obstacles so that we spread out the action somehow. After we've found the lion (or bear, or dragon, or whatever it is in the version you know and love), there's no hanging about repeating cute phrases. It's pick up your gun and GET OUTTA THERE! Through the cave, pant pant – out through the quicksand, HEAVE, HEAVE; through the bushes, swish agggghgh swish; across the grass – RUUUUUUNNN!! Ahhh, phew! Home again.

In other words, climb up the hill slowly, then jump off the cliff. The journey to the cave, therefore, may take twice as long as the journey home from the cave, even though the characters are jumping the same hurdles. Easy peasy. You could invent a whole series of exciting picture books using just this technique, and altering the objects/hurdles/challenges to suit your subject matter.

So now, with your story pretty much mapped out, you can get on and write it! You just need to add some words (try repeating cushions, like 'I'm not afraid. Got my gun by my side. Bullets. Two!) around each of the articles increasing in size, and you'll be there.

Well done. Now you've got several well-structured picture book stories starting to form. We'll start to target it specifically to the ideal picture book format in the next chapter. For now just find that inner piglet, follow it right to the tip of its springy tail, or sneak up on that creature in its hilltop cave, and go to it.

Enjoy.

SOMETHING TO TRY

Eg 1 Have a go yourself, taking an idea from your what-ifs in the last chapter. Put a key word or two on your beginning and end, another on three peaks of increasing intensity and size, and on your chimney event.

You can either do it across the page as I've done in example 1, or down the page as in the second example.

Now try writing your story more fully, as with Barney and the Snail.

Excellent. Now you have planned your beginning, your ending, and how to avoid flat boring middles and disappointments in the climax. You have identified your peaks and troughs and your chimney even using the three little pigs technique. You are now one of the select group of picture book writers - Plotters with Trotters. Read through some of the existing picture books; with only a few exceptions, they will fit into this type of structure remarkably well.

Eg 2 Take some objects, obstacles or challenges and have five going up to a climax (climb the hill) and then reverse out through the same objects, obstacles or challenges (jump off the cliff).

Summary

Flat middles and disappointing climaxes are commonplace in picture book writing, but planning ahead can help.

Working towards your ending can help you stay on track. You may even want to write it first - especially when you appreciate that it will probably look very like the beginning, though everything will have changed.

Plotting using the three little pigs technique enables you to plot effectively. Once learned, it's never forgotten.

You can add a twist in the tail with a funny or illuminating piece at the end, often done just through illustration, to share a special moment in that triangle between author, adult reader and child reader, where you all know something the character doesn't.

Another plotting technique that works very well is to go into the story with challenges of increasing size up to a crescendo/climax around the middle of the book, then back out of the story going through the same challenges in reverse. Climb the hill, jump off the cliff.

Chapter 4 Page by Page

I always warn new writers when they're starting to investigate writing picture books that it's the most technically complex writing of all, because there are so many issues to consider. Just think, in three chapters we've already investigated several areas that are critical to the creation of a great picture book, and many of these topics are a completely new notion to the would-be picture book writer:

The recognition that picture books are not just short stories with pictures;

The fact that they use very few words - certainly less than 1000 and fewer if you can possibly manage it;

The way authors can (and should) appeal to the other people in the picture book 'triangle' through appropriate and deliberate use of the 'situation', 'setting' and 'theme';

How the child reader loves the 'situation' and that's where you can utilise your 'what if' idea;

That picture books needs a beginning, a middle and an end, in that order, and with interesting rises and falls in the middle and a satisfying ending;

A way to structure picture books effectively to achieve peaks and troughs and a fitting climax is to use the 'Three Little Pigs' technique;

Another useful picture book structure is to head into the middle story with a series of 'somethings' increasing in size, and then back out of the story with those same 'somethings' decreasing in size

This may have given you lots of food for thought, and you may have begun to create your stories for picture books in a slightly different way. You may even have started to *read* picture books in

a slightly different way. And that's good, because they do form a unique sub-set within the children's book stable.

Now I'm going to share with you a particular piece of information that shows just how unique picture books are. I hinted that I'd let you know a 'trick of the trade' that will put you streets ahead of the pack in terms of organising and offering up your picture book manuscript to publishers or type-setters for printing your own books.

The trick is this:

NEARLY ALL PICTURE BOOKS ARE THE SAME SIZE!

Okay, so I know you're whizzing around in your chair now, reaching for your pile of picture books or pulling picture books off the shelf, saying "They are not! This one's ... what ... A4 sized and this one's small and square, and that one's long and rectangular. They're not the same size at all!"

And indeed they are not ... externally. There are different formats and layouts preferred by different publishers: Walker Books tends towards the small, square picture books that are about 20cm by 20cm (and they're often hardback); Scholastic seems to prefer paperback tall and narrow, possibly about the size of a sheet of A4, just to give you a couple of examples. There are variations to this, of course, but if you look at a picture book shelf, the books are not all uniform in size on the outside.

But *internally* they are all the same size.

Think about it. If you've just read a novel and are recommending it to someone who is short on time, they might ask you how big it is. What will your answer be? I would be very surprised if you were to say, 'Oh, it's B format,' or 'Yep. Definitely trade paperback size,' or do that Vogue thing with your hands as you estimate, 'Hmm, maybe 20 centimetres by 10?'

No. You're going to say, 'It's about 300 pages.' Or 'it's this thick' as you make a gauge with your fingers. Now that you're a practiced writer, you might even say (to a writer friend) 'I'd guess it's 60,000 words.'

So this is the case with picture books. Nearly all (as there are always exceptions) are the same thickness, more or less, depending on what kind of paper they're printed on. The exceptions would be books with paper engineering such as pop-ups and add-ons, such as *THE JOLLY POSTMAN* by Janet and Allan Ahlberg, or *THE RABBIT PROBLEM* by Emily Gravett, where in both cases there are envelopes and things to do stuck between and on the pages. Other exceptions, these days, would be books that are digitally produced (and I'll tell you why in a moment). Most picture books are still traditionally produced, and that leads to them being the 'same size'.

And the reason they are more or less the same thickness is that they all the same number of pages. Yes, the same. They don't all have the story spreading across the same number of pages (before you start flipping open examples and shouting at me!), but in general they are all made up of the same number of pages.

And the magic number is ...

32

So if you believed the answer to the great questions of life, the universe, and everything was 42 (for Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy fans), then you were wrong. That might apply to many aspects of life and the universe, but the answer to all question to do with picture books is ... 32.

The reason it's 32 is back to this 'trick of the trade' that I mentioned. It's a printing requirement. To make it easy to piece and fold, chop up, stitch back together in order and provide a printed picture book, the optimal number of pages is 32.

I've actually seen this in practice: a few months ago when I was publishing the picture book *CURLY FROM SHIRLEY, THE CHRISTCHURCH DOG* by Emma Pullar and Victoria M. Azaro, I went along to the printers with our designer, Cheryl, to sign off the proofs. The proofs were spread out on something like a massive architect's desk, and were in **one huge sheet of paper**. Some of the images were upside-down, some were sideways on, and they certainly weren't in any order that I could recognise from this story that I knew so well, and a book that I had personally put together in orderly fashion. Beside it was a little version of the book as it would appear when published, with scraggy edges as if someone had sliced it up with kids' safety scissors (as maybe they had!).

It was quite interesting to witness the differences in our reactions to the 'picture book'. Cheryl, who had obviously seen this many times before, went straight to the oversized sheet of paper, wedged a magnifying glass in her eye socket, and pored over the images that were upside-down, sideways-on, and not in any order. She was checking the quality of the print version, and that the wonderful designs were all as planned.

I, meanwhile, could not make head nor tail of the thing spread all over the printer's desk. In fact, I found it rather frightening. What had they done to our gorgeous book? Surely those people's feet shouldn't be hanging from the ceiling?

While Cheryl did her Sherlock Holmes impression over the proofs, I gingerly picked up the mocked-up Curly book from the side of the desk, and went through it carefully, breathing out a little more with every passing page. It was fine. It was all the right way up, and all ran in exactly the order that I had intended.

To this day I don't know how what origami the printers had to do to take it from patchwork quilt to picture book, but I do know that it worked. Beautifully. And 32 pages it was.

Of course, you may have smaller books, such as board books for babies and readers for school, that are not 32 pages, but you will usually find that if they're not 32 pages, then they are in multiples of 16. A short reader may well be 16 pages, or very occasionally (for very well-

established authors only!) you may find a picture book that is 48 pages long. A baby board-book may be even smaller, at 8 pages. But nearly all standard picture books, whether small or tall, rectangular or square, will be spread across 32 pages. Not including the cover (although sometimes it may include the pages stuck down on the cover if it's a hardback).

I know. It doesn't seem quite feasible, does it?

So here is your first challenge for this chapter of the picture book programme: **find some picture books and count the pages in them. You'll probably be starting at the page just inside the cover, and I'm willing to bet that they are nearly all more or less 32 pages (that's counting left and right sides separately all the way through).**

If you find they are less than 32 pages, or not in a multiple of 16, then it could be that they are digitally produced. Digital production means that the paper is on a large roll, like a loo roll, and gets sliced and diced at the relevant points before being stapled together. To that end, it doesn't matter if it's 12 pages, 20 or 48. Offset printing is done with sheets of paper, fed into the printing machine and completely covered with ink, then cut and folded into 32 pages.

Interesting, yes?

Now go back and have another look. What else is included in those 32 pages?

Correct. It's not all 'story', is it? You might well have listed out items like:

A page with just a picture on it at the beginning;

A page with a picture and the book title on it, along with the names of the author and the illustrator (if they are different people);

A page with the dedication on it;

A page containing lots of publisher information (known as the imprint or copyright page);

A page with acknowledgments on it thanking various people without whom this book couldn't have been written/illustrated (different to the dedication, which is who the book is TO OR FOR);

A page with information about the author and the illustrator, who may be the same person but who are usually two separate people, possibly with a page each;

A page with the next book in the series, or more of this type of book, or more from this particular author/illustrator/publisher.

So already you are starting to see some of the constraints of the format for picture books. The fact that you have only 32 pages might seem restrictive enough, but in reality you have far fewer than 32 pages. At most you will have 31 pages, with just one page for titles and imprints and all the other information: this would be exceptional.

It's far more likely that, once the publisher has lopped off a few bits of space here and there and used them to talk about themselves and what the reader might like to buy from them and so on, you're going to be looking at 29 pages. And then you, the author, might like to have a beautiful dedication and acknowledgements page to express your gratitude to all the people in your life who helped you create this book. The illustrator might have a thing or two to say, as well.

27 pages.

A title page to remind the reader what they're looking at - 26 pages.

And down it goes.

I once had the great pleasure to sit down for dinner next to Julia Donaldson, author of *The Gruffalo* and many more much-loved and highly-esteemed picture books.

First of all, may I just say that she and her husband are delightful people, and regale kids and adults alike with their stories and songs. It's interesting to note that the pair started off as buskers, and that might explain a great deal of Julia's great use of rhyme and resonance, and the melodic underpinning of her stories. When you see them at a book 'reading', they whip out a guitar and sing and bounce their way through many a story, to the delight of all onlookers. Don't worry, you won't be expected to do this to improve books sales! Though if you're any good with a guitar, or even a gazoo, then be prepared ...

Anyway, back to the Julia Donaldson story. At a pertinent point in the evening, I told Julia that I run workshops for people wishing to write picture books, and I asked her advice on the single most important thing I could tell these people, in her highly-valued opinion.

I fully expected an answer along the lines of "get everybody just to love language and rhythm" or "make sure you have fabulous characters that kids love". Even "whip the guitar out and have a good old sing-song!"

But no. Julia's answer to the question of the single most important thing for picture book writers to know was not quite 32, but it was numerical.

It was this:

"Tell them they have 12 DPS to play with, and that's about it."

There you go. A number - 12. And an acronym - DPS, which in this case and in publishing speak generally stands for Double Page Spread, or how the book looks when you open it up and look down on two pages side by side.

Which means that what you need to know first and foremost about creating a picture book is that you may only have a dozen Double Page Spreads, or 24 pages, in which to tell your story.

You see? Technical.

If you think about this in terms of your word-count, you can see why the number of words in picture books is also pretty low, and is typically getting lower. You only have a few words per line (say five or six), and a few lines per page (say five or six) which might mean you have about 25 words x 24 pages which is 600 words. If you bear in mind, too, that you might not have text on every single page, then you can easily see how 500 words might be more appropriate for a picture book than 1500 or even 1000.

Now, the good news is that you don't have to stick religiously to 24 pages. You can probably go up to 28 or 29 relatively easily. Furthermore, you don't have to write your story thinking all the time what's going to go on each page. You'll probably find that very difficult to do.

However, it's an incredibly useful piece of information to have in your toolkit, and if you can demonstrate to a publisher that you know about 'standard 32 page picture book format', or you can consider it ahead of time for the printer if you're planning to self-publish your book, then you will definitely give yourself an advantage. You will be taken more seriously. You will sound like a writer of picture books, instead of a writer of short stories with drawings.

You don't need to have laid it out for them with strict instructions as to how much text should go on each page, but you can certainly drop some hints (and you *can* lay it out with recommendations - let's say that rather than 'strict instructions' - if you so desire). And what all that will show, even if all you do is mention in your cover letter that 'My story about Bingo and the Bobby Pins is a 32 page picture book of 625 words', is that you've thought about your story as a book, and you know what you're doing.

So here's how to go about thinking it through. Visually, that big patchwork quilt version of your picture book in simple terms is going to look something like a huge piece of paper divided into 32. You can do this by ... well, dividing a huge piece of paper into 32 (four columns, and eight rows). The first few blocks will be left empty for your dedications, imprint page and so on, and be sure to finish a few blocks before the last square on the storyboard.

You can see that the first Double Page Spread you may get to work with is pages 6 and 7. Your story might well start on page 5, of course. That could allow for a nice introduction to your story. Then you have those 12 DPS to play with, and if you stick to those for the core of the story, you won't go too far wrong, even if it spills over and carries on for up to 30 pages. At least you'll know your story will fit into the 32 page picture book format, even if it only just fits!

Another thing to consider with your all your double page spreads being the left and right page is that you might want to keep some of your story to the right hand page rather than the left - so page 7 instead of page 6. The reason for that?

THE PAGE-TURNER

You want to make sure your readers keep turning those pages. It's where you might have a 'dot dot dot', where the readers can't see what's coming up next and it's held over to the next page as a surprise. This will allow the adult and child reader to gaze at each other in breathless anticipation as the page hesitates in mid-flip, maybe even discussing it in terms of "Oh! What do you think it is?" or "Aggh! I'm scared, Grandad! Will Bingo be okay?"

So if you've got a big surprise in your story, or a lovely satisfying climax or ending, then you might consider having a 'dot dot dot' moment on the right hand page, bearing in mind that it doesn't actually have to be ellipses (dot dot dot) but it very often is. Then save the grand revelation for the next page, which will be a left-hand page or possibly even the whole of the next DPS.

The way you begin to plan this out is to treat the diagram above as a type of storyboard. You might even want to separate a big piece of paper (A3 or bigger) into four by eight squares, say, and pencil in your text on a page by page basis. I say 'pencil' advisedly, because once you start doing this you will inevitably find that you will want or need to change things.

In terms of the three little pigs structure we covered last week, you could find that you have (roughly) a page or two of 'beginning', a page or two of 'catalyst', 2 - 3 pages for first peak, 3 - 4 pages for second peak, 5 - 6 pages for third peak, 2 - 4 or 6 for the 'chimney' event, a page or

two for 'ending', and then another page if you need it for your 'twist in the tale'. All of which adds up to (roughly) 25 or so pages. These are guidelines only, so don't worry if your story doesn't fit this pattern completely!

So now you've got your story laid out as it might look WHEN IT'S PUBLISHED! (Pause, here, for a short celebratory dance around your desk).

This isn't the way you will present it to the publisher. You will simply present them with a manuscript. In fact, please do not try to present it to the publisher as if you've laid it all out on a storyboard ready for publication, and have even added some funky text to it to indicate just how you'd like the finished article to be. This will put the publisher off. And it makes it very hard to read the manuscript.

However, you might want to indicate to them that you've got at least an idea of how this is going to work in its final version by offering them your story broken down into page text.

Eg BARNEY AND THE SNAIL, by Jill Marshall

Page 4 Dedication

Page 5

Barney watched sadly as his mum packed up his special duvet cover with Buzz Lightyear on it.

"Why do we have to move, Mummy?" he said.

"Because Daddy has a new job," said Mummy. "It will be very exciting."

But Barney liked his old house. He liked his old gnarly apple tree in the garden. And he liked his bedroom, stuffed full of his favourite things.

So when the removal van came and Mummy put their suitcases in her car, Barney ran out to the garden ...

Page 6 - 7

... and he HID.

Under the bushes, he found a worm. “You don’t have to leave your home, Worm, do you?” said Barney crossly.

The worm didn’t answer. It just slithered under a leaf, and disappeared down a hole. It looked very damp and cold.

Page 8 - 9

Barney shivered. Then he scrummaged further into the bush so Mummy wouldn’t find him, even when he heard her calling.

Page 10 - 11

On the bark of a tree, he found a beetle. “Lucky Beetle,” said Barney. “I bet nobody ever packs up your favourite duvet.”

Page 12 - 13

But the beetle just took to its eight feet, scuttling up the tree trunk until it disappeared into the rain. Without an umbrella. Barney wondered just where Beetle’s duvet might be, and then he realised that beetles probably don’t have cosy blankets.

Page 14 - 15

He sniffed, and squeezed behind the tree until he was next to the shed.

“Barney, where are you?” called Mummy.

“I’m not here!” he shouted back. He was not going to go to some silly old other house when he could stay in this perfectly nice one.

Page 16 - 17

Just then he felt something squelchy. A frog! He’d nearly put his hand on it.

“What are you doing here, Frog? We don’t have a pond.”

The frog just croaked at him, and bounded away to the bird bath under the apple tree. Poor Frog, thought Barney. He didn’t even have his own home to live in. He had to use someone else’s.

Page 18 - 19

“Barney, where are you?” shouted Mummy.

Quick, hide! Barney thought, and he scampered into the shed. This was his shed. He could live in here. Although it was a bit cobwebby. And it smelled funny. And there was a strange scratchy scratch sound at the window.

As he huddled behind the wheelbarrow, just a teensy bit frightened, Barney spied another creature ...

Page 20 - 21

It was a snail.

A sweet little snail, slurping up the side of the plant pot.

Snail, carrying his home on his back.

Page 22 - 23

“Barney, where are you?” yelled Mummy again. She sounded very cross and a little bit scared.

Barney watched Snail. Snail watched Barney. All at once, Barney knew what the snail was doing. It was moving house. With its shell on its back, cosy and warm and dry and not scared, it had packed up its home and was moving to somewhere new and comfortable, where the other snails lived.

“Thank you, Snail!” he said as he jumped up.

Page 24 - 25

He ran outside, up the path and out to the removal van.

Mummy looked very worried, and shouted “Barney, where are you?” just as Barney popped up beside her.

“Here I am!” he said.

Mummy gave him a hug. “Are you ready to move to our new house?”

Page 26 - 27

And he really was, because he knew that home was wherever his toys, and Mummy and Daddy, and his special Buzz Lightyear duvet happened to be.

“I can’t wait,” said Barney with a big happy smile.

And off they went.

Page 28 - 29

Page 30 - 31

There’s Barney and the Snail again, broken down now from the original story that I drafted out, and now laid out in more or less the way it might appear in final picture book form. I didn’t get to this layout immediately as I was going to devote more pages to each time Barney’s mum shouted for him and he hid again, but then I discovered by storyboarding it that I would then run out of pages. So this is after quite a bit of re-jigging.

What you’ll also notice from my example above is that the amount of text on each DPS varies. This is deliberately so, to make it more interesting for the reader and also to allow for the illustrator and designer to add their expertise to the mix. Sometimes you will have brilliant illustrations that dominate the page rather than the text, and in those cases you need fewer words.

What this manuscript layout would do for someone receiving this story is make it easier for them to visualise as a picture book, and it will show them that I’m used to picture book formats and know quite a lot about how they are formed.

Not all publishers want to receive manuscripts in this way, and some would rather have the straight story. However, I haven’t met any who object if you send the straight story and *also* let them know that you can help them to do the job properly by laying it out in this way.

Eventually, as with plotting and dreaming up ideas, you’ll start to do this naturally, without having to pore over it for hours. Which is good, because that’s not the end of the editing!

In the next chapter, we're going to look at the other element that will indicate to an outsider that you really know what you're doing, and that you've carefully thought this through. And it's a sure-fire way to bring your word-count down too!

It's all in the illustrations.

Happy storyboarding, and remember the real answer to the question of life, the universe and everything is ... 32!

SOMETHING TO TRY

Take one of your stories that you've written so far, or start a new one if you like, and 'storyboard' it by finding a large piece of paper and dividing it into 32 squares (I usually do four columns and eight rows, on my flipchart for ease). Remember to use the middle 12 Double Page Spreads for the most part, and then if you use a few extra pages you'll still be within picture book parameters.

Next, try popping your text onto the storyboard, remembering to think about page turners and how much text you have per DPS or page. If you have a 2 - 3 year old picture book with very few words, you can stick them straight into the storyboard framework to see how they will have most effect!

Great. Now, don't be too alarmed if you've found this particular exercise rather challenging. It can be the moment when you first feel as if you've got too many words, you're losing the flow of the story, or you just can't get your head around the visual layout of the book.

If you do, that's the whole point. If that's how it seems to you, that's how it will appear to the reader, too. Keep going, you'll get there!

If you want to, you could take a few favourite picture books and try translating the book to the storyboard layout, and you'll get a feel for how your story might also translate in the same way.

Summary

Most picture books are the same size! This is largely down to traditional printing requirements, and although it is changing with the advent of digital printing, ebooks and picture book apps, most printed picture books are still created to this format.

The most common picture book format is 32 pages (not including the cover), although you also find multiples of 16 are used so smaller books may be 16 pages, and larger books may occasionally be 48 pages.

Although the format is known to be 32 pages, you have fewer pages to actually write your story - try not to go over 30 pages, and remember Julia Donaldson's advice that you have 12 DPS to play with.

A great way to fit your story to the picture book format is to 'storyboard' it using the layout diagram as a guide, so you can see what might fit on a DPS and also where you might want to introduce some page-turners.

Once you've matched it to the 32 page storyboard, you can (if you wish) lay out your manuscript so that the person you're sending it to can see what would go on each page or DPS, and they'll appreciate your understanding of picture books.

Chapter 5 Illustration

It seems amazing, doesn't it? We've managed to get to the fifth chapter in a guide about picture books before we've even begun to talk about illustrations. How is that possible? As I said in the very first chapter (remember back then?), it seems strange that one can *write* a picture book without being able to do the ... well, pictures ... too.

But that's the truth. You could really write a picture book without even thinking about the illustrations, to be honest, as that can all be dealt with by somebody else. While I think it's good to have given some thought to the illustrations, personally, I'm really glad that someone else gets to take care of the pictures. I'm one of those people who draws a bird and someone will say, 'Oh, nice potato.' 'It's got feet,' I'll say. 'And wings.' But the onlooker just thinks it has sprouty bits sticking out of the bottom and is symmetrically lumpy on either side. Maybe not even that symmetrically, now they look at it properly.

Anyway, you get the gist. I cannot draw. But I can dream up stories for someone else to add the pictures to with no trouble whatsoever. It's a wonderful moment when the pictures appear, too, and quite surreal. If seeing your words in print for the first time is a brilliant event, then seeing your words intertwined with another person's incredible illustrations is an out-of-body experience. In the case of a picture book, the sum of the parts does not make the whole - it makes it 150% of the whole.

It is my firm belief that as an author, you are more indebted than you could ever imagine to your illustrator. Without them, there would be no book. When I held my first copy of my novel *Jane Blonde* with illustrator Chris Garbutt's image of JB on the front, I was overwhelmed and slightly in awe of what I'd somehow managed to create. When I held my first copy of picture book *Kave-Tina Rox*, I was completely dumbstruck. This was better than my wildest, most far-stretched dreams. This stranger, Sam Childs, whom I had never met, never even spoken to, not even exchanged an *email* with, had plucked the bones of my story out of thin air and given them flesh. Given them colour. Given them ... life. Our book was born.

By the way, I still haven't met Sam. She was in the UK and I was in New Zealand. We did exchange emails when 'our' book was published, and promised to have champagne when we got together, but that still hasn't happened. One day, I hope to work with Sam again, and definitely raise a glass to our joint endeavours.

So how did my story about a cave-girl get sent to Sam? How did we find each other? Let's think about the first issue that I'm sure will have concerned or at least occurred to many of you.

Choosing an illustrator

There's so much to say on this topic that it's hard to know where to begin, but I suppose the easiest way to start is to tell you that *you don't need to choose your illustrator*. If your aim is for your story to be published by a mainstream publisher, then they will find your illustrator for you. That's what my publisher did for me with Kave-Tina Rox: I wrote the story, sent it to them, and they found the illustrator (and what a find she was too).

So there you go. If that's your choice, you can skip the rest of this section.

Although I suppose you might want to know why they choose one for you. And what if you've got one because your friend/partner/offspring is a great artist? What if, in fact, you're not at all like me, and can do your own illustrations? Well, let's consider those issues in turn.

Publishers' illustrators

Publishers usually have their own 'stable' of illustrators, gathered over the years to develop a house style. They will have a clear idea of what they would like your book to look like, and that will be different but not too dissimilar to the rest of their books. I mentioned Walker Books in the last chapter: you can spot a Walker Book a mile off (or I can, and you'll be able to soon). Not only are they often similar in format (32 pages, of course! Also squarish, roughly 20cm by 20cm, hardback) but they are also usually quite distinctive in style with illustrations that are rounded and soft. They might include small, cute animals. This is a generalisation, of course, but they do have a house style and they stick to it pretty closely.

Publishers pay the illustrator and then have the final say over the illustrations, so clearly they'll want to work with someone who knows how they operate, who fits the bill stylistically and is

going to deliver to deadline. It's a business, after all. They probably won't consult you too much in their choice, although you will get the chance (probably) to veto illustrations that you really don't like.

When the first rough of Kave-Tina was sketched out, she was very soft and young looking, with smooth hair that flipped up at the ends - very Walker Books, in fact. I suggested that she needed to look scruffier, a little older, more feisty, and luckily Hachette agreed with me. The illustrator set to work and then produced the most wonderful depiction of Kave-Tina that I could have hoped for, with embellishments like snakes instead of ringlets, and twigs as hair decorations. She was perfect - and I was very relieved, because I'm not sure that I'd have had another chance to ask for changes ...

Another reason that publishers like to choose their illustrators is that they choose *illustrators* rather than just artists. Fabulous artists can often make great illustrators, but there's a heap of 'technical' information that illustrators need to consider as they create the pictures for a book. There's the fact that it's in a 32 page format, to start with. Then there's whether it's fully illustrated with pictures across every page and the text mingled in with them; or text one side and full portrait style pictures on the next, or books can be sprinkled with pictures in little vignettes throughout. They have to consider the 'gutter' - the middle of the DPS that disappears into the spine when the book is opened. Any detail put into that area will be lost. And the way the pictures should lead the reader in the right direction to pore over a page, or grab the bottom right hand corner and get reader to turn. Not to mention the fact that they have to take someone else's words, more often than not, and transfer them somehow into a version of the image the author had in their head, only better.

Furthermore, it's not just the illustrator who needs to consolidate all this information. Until I published *Curly from Shirley, the Christchurch Dog*, I had no real comprehension of just how much work the *designer* does to create a gorgeous artefact. The designer and the illustrator are not the same person, but they almost have to operate as one. Responsible for bringing together the text and the illustration into a unified and glorious picture book, the designer checks the look and feel of it all the way through, making sure that style remains consistent - not just throughout the book, but with the other books that the publisher produces too.

This is just scratching the surface, of course. Illustration and design are art-forms to be mastered over years of study and practise. It's becoming even more critical for illustrators to have a very strong grasp of what they're doing as digital advances take over - yes, even in the tactile world of picture books. Picture books are now being converted to apps (which are 'applications' for Apple products like the iPad), or to games, or enhanced ebooks with moving pictures and sounds and music added in. The illustrator and designer have to be aware of how their work might translate into different formats and media.

There's always a huge debate on my 'live' workshops when I tell participants that, these days, picture books sometimes come out as apps first. Usually someone will shudder at the thought of a toddler's sticky fingers all over their iPad screen; 80% of the rest of the room will look pained and personally hurt, as if I've shattered some childhood dream for them - their own, or their children's. As indeed, I may have done! How could I possibly suggest that the picture book will ever be anything other than that beautiful object to hold, sharing in that triangular relationship that we covered back in the first chapter?

Well, I'm not suggesting the picture book will ever disappear. To my mind, it's probably the one sector of the published book world where the printed book may not be threatened, as people - parents, teachers, aunts and uncles, grandparents, babysitters - will always want that story-sharing experience with the children in their care.

However, I do think it's important to bear in mind that this world is changing, and it's changing now. It's not just 'out there' for some point in the future. There are companies springing up who only publish picture books as apps, for example. I think it's exciting: think of it not as the demise of the printed book (which I'm convinced will always exist), but as the dawn of an age in which there are so many more ways to get your story across to your readers.

You can see it's a shifting and technical world - increasingly technical, in fact! Publishers are all dealing with these changes and advances, as well as managing the traditional book forms that have existed since the advent of the printing press, and this contributes to the many reasons why they like to choose professional illustrators who will do the job properly, first time around. It just makes everyone's job a lot easier. Not necessarily faster, but probably easier.

But my friend/neighbour/grandson is an artist

Some of this will have been addressed in the discussion above. They may be a wonderful artist, but are they an illustrator? Do they work on picture books and understand the format? Alan Gilderdale, the illustrator of *The Little Yellow Digger* written by his wife, Betty Gilderdale, is a fine artist by training and profession, yet found there was much to learn and alter in order to illustrate a book.

There are other issues, too, with suggesting your own illustrator who is a friend, neighbour or family member. As we have now discovered, most publishers like to choose their own illustrators. They may like the artist you've suggested, or they may not. More than likely not (because they're probably not an illustrator).

If you've sent your story in and it looks as though you're already tied to an illustrator, the publisher will consider it a joint effort and look at it as one item. That means that if they love the story but don't like the illustrations, they'll reject it. If they adore the pictures but aren't so fond of the text, they'll reject it. It's highly unlikely that they will come back to you and suggest that you separate, and they're also not likely to tell you the reason for rejecting your book - so you'll never know if it was your story or the illustrations!

This is probably a good time, incidentally, to remind you about payments for picture book writers and illustrators. Usually authors are paid a small advance (a thousand to two thousand dollars, typically) and then once that advance is paid off the author will start to make royalties. Royalties are usually 10% of the recommended retail price (RRP) - and reduce when the books are sold at discount and so on. Illustrators of picture books are paid in roughly the same way, but here's the clincher: you share the royalties! You will each get about 5% of RRP per copy sold. So one reason that it might be an advantage to find your own illustrator is that you could arrange a flat fee with them and then the royalties are all yours. On balance, however, my advice would be to leave the choice of illustrator to the publisher. It just makes it more feasible for your book to make it to publication.

But I'm an illustrator too!

Okay. That, my friend, is a whole different ball game. Creative types who can write the words and then illustrate them themselves are highly sought after. There aren't that many people who can do both equally well, but they do exist, and editorial input can help strengthen weak areas in any case.

Just imagine it from the publisher's point of view: someone has written a fantastic story, they have a clear idea of what they want it to look like, and they can *actually make that happen!* The publisher only has to deal with one doubly-talented person who will manage the entire process themselves. It may take longer as they're doing both elements of the book (and bear in mind here that picture books often take up to two years to reach publication, because the illustration and design can take so long). However, the end product is going to be pretty much what was visualised and expected in the first place, and the author/illustrator will be able to generate their own unique style. Just look at all those picture books by Lauren Child ...

The moral of this story is: if you're a writer/illustrator, and can carry out both elements to an equally lofty level, then make it known. It could well be to your advantage.

Not choosing an illustrator

You may have decided, after reading all of this, that you probably won't bother trying to identify an illustrator. However, you still have a clear idea of what you would like your picture book to look like in an ideal world, and you would like to make some recommendations to the illustrator and/or publisher.

That's fine. You are definitely allowed to do that, and there are a few ways you might do that so that it gets your point across but doesn't offend the other party.

Find an illustrator you like, preferably one that works for the publisher you're applying to, and hopefully is still alive, still illustrating, and is not ridiculously famous and therefore unlikely to work with new authors, at least not unless they are paid a huge amount of money. Probably not a great idea to ask for Quentin Blake, then. But you could probably suggest that you love Quentin Blake's style and hope that they have someone in their stable who illustrates in a similar way. If you know of an illustrator in their stable who illustrates in the same way, name them.

You can mention in your cover letter or somewhere in the correspondence between you that you like Flamingo Foster's illustrations, and loved what she did with Bingo and the Bobby Pins, for instance. That's just gently guiding them in the right direction, and gives the impression that they might be able to change your mind if they don't agree.

Provide an artist's brief: this will probably be less than a page of information where you suggest that you'd like watercolour, cuddly furry animals as oppose to angular scary ones, a stand-out character with brilliant blue eyes ... anything you think the illustrator might not be able to work out just by reading your text.

I'm not enough of an artist to ever supply this kind of advice, I must admit. My artist's brief would probably be something like 'Please draw some pictures that look like my characters and story, and ... um ... make them pretty. Maybe use purple because it's my favourite colour.'

You might be a completely different kettle of fish, and can say something halfway sensible. Many publishers prefer this type of approach to detailed instructions on what every page should look like.

The other alternative is to lay out your text as we discussed in Chapter 4 on picture book layout, and send one version with just the text on it, and another with picture suggestions on the same layout. You could either italicise your illustration suggestions, or put them in brackets. Either way, you just need to make it clear that these are *not* part of the story and should *not* be included in the text.

You should avoid providing any instructions for the illustrator if you don't have anything to tell that they couldn't work out for themselves from the wording.

You should definitely send an artist's brief, however, if you have a clever wee picture book like *ROSIE'S WALK* by Pat Hutchins, where there are two different stories happening simultaneously: the story that's told through the text, and the story shown in the illustrations. For example:

Straight text version

BARNEY AND THE SNAIL, by Jill Marshall

Page 4 Dedication

Page 5

Barney watched sadly as his mum packed up his special duvet cover with Buzz Lightyear on it.

“Why do we have to move, Mummy?” he said.

“Because Daddy has a new job,” said Mummy. “It will be very exciting.”

But Barney liked his old house. He liked his old gnarly apple tree in the garden. And he liked his bedroom, stuffed full of his favourite things.

So when the removal van came and Mummy put their suitcases in her car, Barney ran out to the garden ...

Page 6 - 7

... and he HID.

Under the bushes, he found a worm. “You don’t have to leave your home, Worm, do you?” said Barney crossly.

The worm didn’t answer. It just slithered under a leaf, and disappeared down a hole. It looked very damp and cold.

Page 8 - 9

Barney shivered. Then he scrummaged further into the bush so Mummy wouldn’t find him, even when he heard her calling.

Page 10 - 11

On the bark of a tree, he found a beetle. "Lucky Beetle," said Barney. "I bet nobody ever packs up your favourite duvet."

Page 12 - 13

But the beetle just took to its eight feet, scuttling up the tree trunk until it disappeared into the rain. Without an umbrella. Barney wondered just where Beetle's duvet might be, and then he realised that beetles probably don't have cosy blankets.

Page 14 - 15

He sniffed, and squeezed behind the tree until he was next to the shed.

"Barney, where are you?" called Mummy.

"I'm not here!" he shouted back. He was not going to go to some silly old other house when he could stay in this perfectly nice one.

Page 16 - 17

Just then he felt something squelchy. A frog! He'd nearly put his hand on it.

"What are you doing here, Frog? We don't have a pond."

The frog just croaked at him, and bounded away to the bird bath under the apple tree. Poor Frog, thought Barney. He didn't even have his own home to live in. He had to use someone else's.

Page 18 - 19

"Barney, where are you?" shouted Mummy.

Etc! You know how this goes by now.

Text and illustration suggestions version

BARNEY AND THE SNAIL, by Jill Marshall

Page 4 Dedication

Page 5

Barney watched sadly as his mum packed up his special duvet cover with Buzz Lightyear on it.

“Why do we have to move, Mummy?” he said.

“Because Daddy has a new job,” said Mummy. “It will be very exciting.”

But Barney liked his old house. He liked his old gnarly apple tree in the garden. And he liked his bedroom, stuffed full of his favourite things.

So when the removal van came and Mummy put their suitcases in her car, Barney ran out to the garden ...

(illustration to show a house, an apple tree, a removal van and Mum putting suitcases in the car).

Page 6 - 7

... and he HID.

Under the bushes, he found a worm. “You don’t have to leave your home, Worm, do you?” said Barney crossly.

The worm didn’t answer. It just slithered under a leaf, and disappeared down a hole. It looked very damp and cold.

(illustration to show worm going down a hole)

Page 8 - 9

Barney shivered. Then he scrummaged further into the bush so Mummy wouldn't find him, even when he heard her calling.

(illustration to show Barney squeezing himself under a bush)

Okay. I'm sure you get the idea. This is an example of 'stating the bleeding obvious', to quote Monty Python. Your illustrator/publisher will first of all be a little insulted by this, then they will possibly decide they don't like the story on the strength of it, and then even if they do like the story they'll probably ignore the suggestions.

However, if you have a strong stylised version in mind, you could try something like this:

Page 5

Barney watched sadly as his mum packed up his special duvet cover with Buzz Lightyear on it.

"Why do we have to move, Mummy?" he said.

"Because Daddy has a new job," said Mummy. "It will be very exciting."

But Barney liked his old house. He liked his old gnarly apple tree in the garden. And he liked his bedroom, stuffed full of his favourite things.

So when the removal van came and Mummy put their suitcases in her car, Barney ran out to the garden ...

(Barney is up the tree and we are seeing everything through his binoculars).

Page 6 - 7

... and he HID.

Under the bushes, he found a worm. "You don't have to leave your home, Worm, do you?" said Barney crossly.

The worm didn't answer. It just slithered under a leaf, and disappeared down a hole. It looked very damp and cold.

(through the binoculars, the worm is enormous and Barney feels like a Lilliputian)

Page 8 - 9

Barney shivered. Then he scrummaged further into the bush so Mummy wouldn't find him, even when he heard her calling.

(every bug, leaf and cobweb is magnified stupendously by the binoculars)

A little different, isn't it? What we're doing with the illustrations in this case is literally *magnifying* Barney's sense of being alone and scared. Now, if the publisher did not agree at all that this was the way the book should look but they really liked the story, they could discuss this with you. Depending on how strongly you felt about how it should look, you could move in their suggested direction or you could agree to disagree and take the story somewhere else (if you haven't signed a contract!).

For my own books, I'm usually pretty flexible on matters like illustration and design. My strength lies in the words; I'm happy to leave the rest of it to people who know better than I do. For that reason, I will generally submit picture books either as straight text, even without the page breakdowns, because I know the person I'm sending it to will do a great job with it without my help. If I send page breakdowns, I might just send the text version.

If I do send illustration suggestions, I always send two versions: the text with page breakdowns, and then the same text and page breakdowns with picture suggestions. That way the publisher will know 1) I know what I'm doing 2) I'm flexible enough to let them start afresh, or go with my suggestions to some degree.

Letting the illustrator do their job

What I always, ALWAYS do when I'm submitting picture book manuscripts is make sure that whatever I send is something an illustrator can work with. I let them get on with it. This will endear you to the illustrator and publisher forever.

And how do you do that?

First of all, you need to remember that this is not a short story with pictures, as the first version of Barney would turn out to be. This is a picture book. The pictures tell their own story. They need to be varied, interesting, dynamic, and both support and enhance your words.

So the first thing I will do is make sure that something different is happening on every page. I'm going to let the illustrator go to town by cottoning onto a different motif, animal, idea, or focus at every turn. If you've got three DPS of Georgie eating an apple, make sure that the first one is Georgie's open mouth, and the second is the apple zooming towards it, and the third is the maggot poking its head out of a hole ... See how different that is to Georgie sitting on a chair with the apple at three different stages of moving towards his mouth.

The second issue I will address is that 'stating the bleeding obvious' one. If the illustrator can 'show' it in the illustrations, then I don't need to say it. Therefore, rather than writing what I might say if this were a chapter book ...

Georgie sat on a chair in the kitchen. It was kind of wobbly with one leg shorter than the other three and his name written on the back of it in chalk. He selected the biggest, shiniest apple from the pile on the table beside him, and opened his mouth to take a massive, outstanding chunk out of it.

(59 words already, and he's not doing anything yet!).

... I might see what the illustrator could show, while still leaving in enough words to make it flow:

Georgie sat down on his special chair in the kitchen. He chose the biggest, shiniest apple of all, and opened his mouth wide.

This is just 23 words, much more fun, younger in age, and leaves plenty for the illustrator to play around with. Already I could imagine them showing an enormous mouth. The illustrator and designer between them could even turn the word 'wide' into teeth and fit them inside the enormous mouth. Or they could come up with something much better!

This is the joy of letting the illustrator do their work - they add so much to the story that non-artists like me could ever have imagined.

And you reduce your word-count. Significantly.

So let's apply that now the first few pages of Barney and the Snail.

Page 5

Barney watched sadly as his mum packed up his special duvet cover with Buzz Lightyear on it.

The illustrations could show Buzz Lightyear ; it's enough to know it's special.

"Why do we have to move, Mummy?" he said.

"Because Daddy has a new job," said Mummy. "It will be very exciting."

But Barney liked his old house. He liked his old gnarly apple tree in the garden. And he liked his bedroom, stuffed full of his favourite things.

Could cut this out and show in the pictures, but it flows quite nicely so I'll keep it in.

So when the removal van came and Mummy put their suitcases in her car, (this could go as can be shown, more interesting to see what Barney's doing) Barney ran out to the garden ...

Page 6 - 7

... and he HID.

Under the bushes, he found a worm. "You don't have to leave your home, Worm, do you?" said Barney crossly.

But the worm just slithered under a leaf, and disappeared down a hole. It looked very damp and cold.

Cut this out and show the dampness and coldness of the worm hole, perhaps through Barney's binoculars ...

Page 8 - 9

Barney shivered. Then he scrummaged further into the bush so Mummy wouldn't find him, even when he heard her calling.

Fine.

Page 10 - 11

On the bark of a tree, he found a beetle. "Lucky Beetle," said Barney. "I bet nobody ever packs up your favourite duvet."

But the beetle just took to its eight feet, scuttling up the tree trunk until it disappeared into the rain. Without an umbrella. Barney wondered just where Beetle's duvet might be, and then he realised that beetles probably don't have cosy blankets. - would be nicer to 'show' Barney imagining this in a cloud ...

Page 14 - 15

He sniffed, and squeezed behind the tree until he was next to the shed.

"Barney, where are you?" called Mummy.

"I'm not here!" he shouted back.

He was not going to go to some silly old other house when he could stay in this perfectly nice one.

This is rather stating the obvious anyway, so would suggest cut.

Page 16 - 17

Just then he felt something squelchy. A frog! He'd nearly put his hand on it.

Can show this.

"What are you doing here, Frog? We don't have a pond."

So how that would look in the new version is:

Page 5

Barney watched sadly as his mum packed up his special duvet cover.

“Why do we have to move, Mummy?” he said.

“Because Daddy has a new job,” said Mummy. “It will be very exciting.”

But Barney liked his old house. He liked his old gnarly apple tree in the garden. And he liked his bedroom, stuffed full of his favourite things. So Barney ran out to the garden ...

Page 6 - 7

... and he HID.

Under the bushes, he found a worm. “You don’t have to leave your home, Worm, do you?” said Barney crossly.

But the worm just slithered under a leaf, and disappeared down a hole.

Page 8 - 9

Barney shivered. Then he scummaged further into the bush so Mummy wouldn’t find him, even when he heard her calling.

Page 10 - 11

On the bark of a tree, he found a beetle. “Lucky Beetle,” said Barney. “I bet nobody ever packs up your favourite duvet.”

But the beetle just took to its feet, scuttling up the tree trunk until it disappeared into the rain.

Page 14 - 15

Barney sniffed, and squeezed behind the tree until he was next to the shed.

“Barney, where are you?” called Mummy.

“I’m not here!” he shouted back.

Page 16 - 17

Just then he felt something squelchy.

“What are you doing here, Frog? We don’t have a pond.”

In this version, if I decided to add in some suggestions for the illustrator, they would be guidelines to showing what isn’t in the text, rather than what is, right down to the number of feet a beetle has! For instance:

On the bark of a tree, he found a beetle. “Lucky Beetle,” said Barney. “I bet nobody ever packs up your favourite duvet.”

But the beetle just took to its feet, scuttling up the tree trunk until it disappeared into the rain.

(Barney imagines his own cosy room, and then pictures where the beetle must live - nothing cosy there at all.)

In writing it this way, I’ve done two things which will make me popular with a publisher: firstly, I’ve cut the word-count, and secondly, I’ve left room to manoeuvre for the illustrator and designer. They can then visualise it for themselves, decide what the end product might look like, and pick an illustrator who can deliver the goods.

You may find, when you start to do this, that you feel as though you’re losing the flow of the language. Don’t worry - you’re not. Unless it becomes completely impossible to read it aloud, in which case you may have gone too far! Remember, we are not looking for brevity for brevity’s sake; we are looking for a combined effort between author and illustrator. A satisfying reading experience for both the adult and the child reader on that bottom axis of the picture book triangle. A great picture book, no less!

Well done. I know there's a lot to take in and experiment with, but this is really where the difference between someone who writes short stories and someone who writes picture books really begins to shine out.

And don't forget that because you've considered all these issues, the quality of the straight text version of your story will be so much higher - without page breakdowns, picture suggestions or anything other than your wonderful words - that you can simply send that, knowing that you've done your job extremely well, so that everyone else can do theirs.

Those wonderful words is where we are next headed.

SOMETHING TO TRY

Have a go now for yourself. Take one of the picture books that you've written, and try it out in these four ways:

#1 Suggest an illustrator to a publisher – someone they use!

#2 Prepare an artist's brief that depicts information the illustrator would not know otherwise

#3 Add illustration suggestions for the picture book you laid out in the last chapter, making sure to: leave space for the illustrator to do their job; have something different for them to do on each page, and enable them to 'show' information so that you don't need to 'tell' it.

#4 Rewrite your story so that you omit the 'bleeding obvious' or anything that would be better illustrated than stated in words.

#5 (I know I said 5, but this is for those of you who want to try it) – find an illustration course and learn how to do it yourself (eg with the excellent Sandra Morris who has her own illustration agency as well as a huge backlist of her own illustrated books)

Summary

Illustrations make up more than 50% of your book - they enhance the story so much that the sum of the parts is far bigger than the whole;

Publishers generally like to find their own illustrators for a variety of reasons, mostly to do with the rigorous requirements for illustrating;

If you want to provide your own illustrations, there are different issues to consider depending on whether you are the illustrator and writer yourself, or you're recommending someone you know;

You can send in your suggestions for illustrations by suggesting the style of an illustrator whose work you like, supplying an artist's brief, or adding illustration suggestions to your text;

You can always supply just the text on its own; if so, make sure you've left plenty of capacity for the illustrator to do their job by varying the story, and letting them 'show' information rather than you 'telling' it.

Chapter 6 Rhymes and times and things like that

In the last chapter we applied a great deal of thought to the illustrations that will make up a good half of our picture book. Now we're going to think about the rest: the magical words and language you will use to tell your story.

This is often a thorny issue for picture book writers, because many of us love beautiful words, clever syntax, glorious language ... that's why we're writers, isn't it? And yet here I am telling you that you need *less* words, not more. That's true, of course, and you're starting to understand the reasons why.

Perversely, this really means that we have to love our words even *more*. Every word has to count. Every word has to be necessary. Every single word needs to earn its place in our picture book.

In this chapter, then, we're going to consider how they earn their place: whether it's because of the voice or tense; because it's a matter of rhyme, or because it's a brilliant word that kids love or you want to teach them, and you have to get it in there somewhere!

The first matter to consider before you start to write is the age of the intended reader (not the actual reader, remember, but the intended reader). Many people start out without considering this issue at all, and generally it's to their detriment. As always, there are some exceptions - some people who instinctively pitch their language at exactly the right level - but most of us don't. At least, not until we've had some practice.

Should we try to introduce the reader to new and complex words? That's up to you; the market you're writing for (if it's educational, go for it), and the word itself. Yes, it is fine and sometimes commendable to stretch the child's vocabulary. However, are you, in fact, using adult language, which could serve to either patronise, confuse or both?

Or are you relating a tale in beautifully honed three-year-old speak that's actually about Sally going to school? In that case, the language level does not tally with the subject matter.

You have already asked yourself when considering what topic to write about whether the subject matter of your story is age-appropriate. You considered theme, setting and situation, and made sure that they all worked for the age of the child reader at one tip of the reader triangle, and the adult reader at the other tip of the reader triangle. So now the next question to ask yourself is this:

Is the language age-appropriate?

Other questions might be: is this language that the reader might use themselves?

Will they understand it?

Is it going to stretch them a little, but without hurting their brain?

This is where you will start to see most clearly that the book for 2 to 8 year olds that we all imagine we're going to write at first is a bit of a non-starter. What's of interest and comprehension to an eight year old, or a seven, six or five year old for that matter, is not even in the realms of possibility for a two or even a three year old. And the language you would need to use to draw in a toddler audience of terrible twos would, frankly, be laughed out of school by today's savvy five year olds.

My general advice about using long words would be to use them if they're relevant to the story (hippopotamus, fiddlesticks, veterinarian) but not if you just think it's a good word that someone ought to learn (perpendicular, vertiginous, verisimilitude). These are all my favourite words, but while I might use any of the first three in a picture book - provided it had earned its place - I wouldn't dream of using any of the latter three in a picture book. Possibly not even in some adult fiction!

Incidentally, my other favourite word is ‘stuff’. Not only is it onomatopoeic when used in the right context, it’s also a verb and a noun and an all-encompassing little word. And yes, I would use it in a picture book.

Voice

Your voice as an author (and yes, you are an author even if you are ‘just’ writing picture books!) is what will make you distinctive and popular. You might call your author voice your ‘style’. As well as your ‘author’ voice there is the issue of **narrative voice**, or the point of view (POV) through which you are telling the story. Combined with the age-appropriate vocabulary, this is a language choice that will tell the publisher that: you are a serious contender; you understand the market you’re working towards, and you have great ideas for how to converse with your intended audience.

You’ve probably heard of a couple of forms of narrative voice: first person and third person. There are others, but for picture books those two will probably suffice, although we will start to call the third person voice *third person limited*.

Third Person Limited is the classic story-telling voice. It is the third person– he or she or sometimes they – and it is ‘limited’ to only one POV. You never know anything about the story unless you are seeing it from that person’s point of view. Think about Goldilocks and the Three Bears, for instance.

There are many, versions of this, but most are told from the POV of Goldilocks. What the bears are up to while she’s blundering around their house, we don’t really know. We don’t need to know. The story’s about Goldilocks.

(By the way, the ‘Once Upon a Time’ piece that such stories often begin with is not Third Person Limited, but as long as you get quickly into the Limited POV then I won’t worry you with the technicalities of what this voice is! Long, drawn out descriptions of settings and characters are to be avoided anyway, in the interests of brevity and capturing the child’s interest straight away).

I would recommend that you consider using the Third Person Limited for most of your picture books, particularly those for up to the age of five. There is a certain comfort for the child in hearing this traditional styling, and quite honestly it's probably just easier to write as we're so familiar with it ourselves, again from these early beginnings.

Just try to be aware of sticking to that one POV and not wandering off into someone else's head. That changes the voice and makes it rather inaccessible to the child (intended) reader. I find this often happens when Mum or Dad or Granny Jean suddenly insert a little of themselves into the story! It's easily done, but try to stick religiously to the POV of your central character only.

It is possible to use the First Person for picture books. Use of the First Person (where 'I' am telling the story) tends to be for older picture books, where there might be less of a strict adherence to the story and a bit more of the internal ramblings of the 'I' character. It is often used where the main character is a bit more cheeky, more adventurous and driving the plot than in the mode of receiving a lesson, and for books that are a little older. I've used the First Person to tell Kave-Tina's story, for instance, for all of the reasons above.

For younger children, however, the First Person can be very confusing. They are in that triangular reading relationship of actual reader, book, and intended reader. There are just too many 'I's in that equation for little minds to deal with, and it tends to interrupt the flow of the story for them if they're having to stop and ask ...

"Did you do that, Mummy?"

Mummy fumbles for the answer. "No, no, darling, it was Jonty in the book."

"But you said 'I'. Was that me, then?"

"No, no, darling, it was Jonty in the book. Now where was I?"

"Mummy, this book's booooooring."

This simply means they've lost the thread, whereas if it had been written in the Third Person Limited they would have understood completely that Jonty was having an adventure and they were being allowed to take a peek at it.

Overall advice again? Stick to the third person limited, and it will never be wrong. It's always the safe option if you're worried about the issue of narrative voice. If you're not worried, have some fun and try writing your story in the 'other' voice. You can try that now with a story you've already written, changing 'he' and 'she' or 'Darren' and 'Mummy' to 'me' and 'I' - or vice versa.

Tense

You can use either past or present tense, but again as a general principle picture books are often best written in the traditional combination of third person limited and past tense:

Jonty **woke** up to find an enormous apple on his chest. "Goodness," he **said**, because **he'd heard** all about healthy fruit.

Instead of:

Jonty **wakes** up to find an enormous apple on his chest. "Goodness," he **says**, because **he's heard** all about healthy fruit.

Read these pieces aloud and see what a difference it makes. When I hear them, the second piece sounds older and Jonty seems a little less sympathetic as a character. What do you think?

Present tense seems often to fit better with the first person – it's a bit older, more involved with the character, and can add a sharper edge to a picture book in that older age range. If we try Jonty again in the present tense and first person, it will sound different again.

I wake up to find an enormous apple on my chest. "Goodness," **I say**, because **I've heard** all

about healthy fruit.

How does this sound to you?

I quite like it, but I can hear distinctly that it's heading out of the picture book age range, and is now starting to sound like an early chapter book for seven to nine year olds. It might even be a Kafka-esque novella for adults.

The best advice I can give you with regard to voice and tense is to experiment. Try it all four ways if you need to – 3PL past tense, 3PL present tense, 1P past tense, 1P present tense. One will just feel right, I can assure you, and you'll be amazed at how your story blazes with life when you get the combination right.

And if you're ever concerned about it, the classic mix of third person limited combined with the past tense is your 'go-to' safety option that will never be wrong. There may be other options that could work better, but you will always be secure in the knowledge that it's the accepted standard for picture books.

Eg She grabbed the pen, stuck it on the page, and off she flew! It was fun being a picture book writer.

Rhyme

This one always sets people off. I do understand why. Many much-beloved picture books are in rhyme. Adults love reading it, and children love hearing it. They join in. They pound the pillow in time. It enables them to pretend they're reading when they've no idea what words they're actually pointing at.

However - and despite the fact that you see it in quite a few popular children's books - publishers do not on the whole like books in rhyme.

There are two reasons for this.

The first is that there are very few people who can get it right, and when it's done badly it's very off-putting indeed. If you want to see it done correctly, then read Dr Seuss, Lynley Dodd, Julia Donaldson – and when I say read, I mean pore over them with the intensity of a forensic investigator. Their rhyme is impeccable. *Impeccable*.

And why? Because they always have the right number of syllables in every line (often eight, sometimes six, but always, always consistent). Their rhyming words actually rhyme. And their rhyme progresses the story; it is never at the expense of it.

If you really, really insist on using rhyme, these are the three factors to look with that same forensic rigour. I've seen them all done incorrectly so many times I can't bear to keep a proper tally (but it has to be close to 95% of the picture book manuscripts I've read), and there's nothing more likely than badly-written rhyme to make me shudder and throw down my red pen in a sulk.

Here goes:

1. Scanning

To keep it simple, this is about counting syllables, making sure you have the same number of syllables on given lines, and ensuring you have the right accents and stresses in each line.

Take a look at this famous first stanza by Rudyard Kipling:

I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.
I send them over land and sea,

I send them east and west;
But after they have worked for me,
I give them all a rest.

First of all, note the pattern. I mean, really really note it. Count it out on your fingers! The first, third, fifth and seventh lines are all the same length at eight syllables (or beats) each:

I keep six ho nest serv ing men
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 syllables

Then every other line is exactly six syllables:
They taught me all I knew

1 2 3 4 5 6 syllables

Many children's books that are in rhyme use this same pattern, or eight syllables per line throughout:

I do not like green eggs and ham
I do not like them, Sam-I-Am

Many would-be picture book authors try to use it and can't! Or they think they've done it and they haven't. I often write on assessments the words 'doesn't scan', by which I mean that the syllable count isn't the same, and/or the stress or accent is the wrong place.

Now, I'm not suggesting that you come over all Shakespearian and start using iambic pentameter or anything, but the above is a simple pattern and it shouldn't be too difficult to make sure you can count out the beats in a similar way.

Where writers often fall down is that they think a word will work in the pattern because of the way they say it themselves. Once it's written down, however, it can come out completely

differently with another reader. Unless you tell the reader how to say it, or get them so well established in the pattern that they do it automatically, then the rhythm may be completely out. By way of example, read the line:

I can't do the washing up.

It has seven syllables, and the stresses at the moment should probably be on "I" and "do", as in

I can't **Do** the washing up.

That would be fine if that was what the writer intended, but it does mean the line is too short if it's in an eight-and-six syllable pattern – you'd need an 'and' or similar on the end to make it scan.

What if the writer actually vocalises it differently, though? What they're imagining the reader saying is "I **CAN'T** do the washing up".

This would change the emphasis entirely, and the writer is hoping that the reader understands they're meant to say 'can't' over two beats as a two-syllable, word when in fact it's only one. To make this evident to the reader, and make a successful eight-syllable line, the writer would really have to say:

I ca-an't do the washing up.

Or better yet: "I cannot do the washing up."

As in:

I cannot do the washing up –
My arms are tired, I'll smash a cup.

Instead of

I can't do the washing up –
My arms are tired, I'll smash a cup.

Hear the difference? See the difference? It may seem like a tiny matter and that I'm hammering the point home somewhat, but I can't emphasise enough how important it is to get it right or you will throw out the whole rhythm.

So put both hands out in front of you, bend your fingers in time, and count those syllables!

Rhyming

Let's look again at that Kipling piece:

I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.
I send them over land and sea,
I send them east and west;
But after they have worked for me,
I give them all a rest.

The last word of every other line rhymes. This may sound obvious, but I will say it again: the last word of every alternate line rhymes. Men rhymes with When. Knew rhymes with Who. Sea and Me and West and Rest also rhyme. I mean, they *actually* rhyme as in they have exactly the same sound and ending. You can play with this a little once you get confident with it, to be fair, but you cannot have two words that only *sort of* rhyme, like 'when' and 'can', or 'west' and 'thirst'. It just won't work, especially for small children.

On a special note to writers in my erstwhile homeland of New Zealand, and other places that have specific accents, you'll need to know and note how words are pronounced in most other places and dialects so as not to confound your rhyme. In my birthplace of Manchester, England, for instance, the word 'glass' would rhyme with 'pass' but not with 'farce'. Particular Kiwi examples would be that 'hair' cannot be rhymed with 'deer', and 'bed' does not rhyme with 'feared' or 'hid'.

This is just another of those dangers of assuming the reader will speak the words the way you imagine them or say them yourself. It's okay if you're doing it deliberately to have a giggle, but not if you did it by accident and had no idea that your rhyme would fall apart the moment it was read by someone beyond your perimeter fence.

Story

In Kipling's poem (and this is only the first verse!) the rhyme serves the story, not the other way round. Quite often ... In fact, scratch that. Nearly every time I assess a rhyming picture book, I have seen writers create a circumstance or character just so that they could make the rhyme work.

Try finding some rhymes for the following words:

Reptilian

Circle

Snodgrass

Table-tennis

Paddling

Wellington

Piglet

Despondent

Now try working that into a poem about a snake-like creature. I've done the first line for you:

The creature was reptilian (8 syllables, so should be okay, yes?)

Now, I'm not sure what you've come up with, but some decent rhymes that spring to mind for me are: pillion, a zillion, or my own full name - Jillian. These are all fine, but to use any of these I am going to have to contort the story to make it fit the rhyme, rather than have the rhyme working for my story. So instead of a sweet tale about a snake found in the garden, we're now going to have go off in another direction:

*The creature was reptilian,
It had to cycle pillion ...*

A fascinating image, but it takes the story in a certain direction (and if you'd have been tempted to slip a 'so' in at the beginning of that line, you wouldn't really be allowed because that would change the syllable count!).

*The creature was reptilian
And soon there were a zillion*

Hmm. Quite nice. Not what I'd planned though ...

*The creature was reptilian
So foul they named it Jillian*

Well, you may have some sympathies with this one! Again, it's not at all bad as a rhyme, but as a picture book it's going to take it off at a tangent about the hideousness of this person called Jillian. It would also (thinking back to the last chapter) be quite difficult to illustrate.

Try writing it again, but use the word 'snake' instead of 'reptilian'.

Here's my attempt at it:

The creature was a tiny snake
Fork-tongued with shiny scales
A pretty handbag it would make
De dum de dum de dum ...

I can't actually think of a satisfactory last line, because again I'm allowing the rhyme to shape the story rather than knowing what the story's about and making the rhyme work for me. I also had to switch the natural ordering of my third line, which isn't too bad in this case but can often lead to very clumsy structuring - again, dictated by the fact that you're writing in rhyme, rather than writing a picture book that rhymes.

Apologies. I may have gone on and on about this, but you'll see that this is an issue that's close to my heart (to rhyme with 'art'). It's close to many publishers' hearts too, and for all of the above reasons, and also because rhyme is much more difficult to translate so they may not be able to make overseas sales in foreign languages.

I got similar feedback for one of my own picture books. While several readers and publishers loved it, and it even though it isn't actually a rhyming book, I was told that it would be too difficult to translate. Here are the first few lines for you to judge for yourself (and you will note that I've written it in the third person limited and the present tense):

Poor Ickle Pickle

This is Pickle.

Pickle is really ickle.

One day, Ickle Pickle wakes up feeling funny peculiar. 'Ickle Pickle is sickle,' Pickle tells Mummy.

'Poor Ickle Pickle,' says Mummy, and she snuggles Pickle close for a special Mummy Huggle.

'Ickle Pickle is sickle,' Pickle tells Grandma.

'I know just what you need,' says Grandma. 'Here's a shiny new nickel for a poorly Ickle Pickle.'

'Will it make me better?' says Ickle Pickle.

'Maybe. It is magic,' says Grandma. 'If you take it to a shop, it can turn into a choccy.'

Then Grandma peers at Ickle Pickle. 'Is that a freckle? Lots of freckles? Right there, on Pickle's neck.'

Mummy peers too. 'That's not a freckle. It's a horrid nasty speckle.'

'I've got speckles on my neckle?' cries Pickle. 'Oh, heckle!'

The story carries on in this vein with a play on the 'ckle' sound, but not in any rhyming formation. Despite the fact that a few publishers put this in the 'too hard' basket, I would recommend this form of wordplay if you like to toy with language (and get a great reaction from readers and listeners) as it's a great deal of fun for you as a writer.

As for rhyme? Personally I'd avoid it, unless your surname is Seuss. There are just as many brilliant picture books in prose as there are in rhyme. In fact, if you're one of the many picture book writers who has so far only written in rhyme, try taking one of your stories and re-writing it in prose. Or write a new story, without rhyme!

That doesn't mean you can't use lyrical and lovely language, but you might find yourself feeling strangely liberated and able to write a much tighter storyline than a rhyme scheme allowed you to create. If rhyme is still the writing method of choice for you, then my advice is study it, read it aloud, get somebody neutral to read it aloud, and then study it again. If it's just the slightest bit out, you won't be doing your story and your lovely picture book any favours at all.

So now you have some words to weave,

Your illustrations too.

And though it's time for me to leave

Your picture book ~~to life will come soon.~~

Your book will come to life soon

You'll

I'll see you next week, Sue

Your dreams will soon come true!

Eek. You see, it's hard. The gist of it is this: you've got ideas, pictures, and words all building up a story in your head and your notebooks. Very soon, you'll be able to see it all coming together.

Happy writing.

SOMETHING TO TRY

Write a rhyming picture book using one of your rhymes from the list in the chapter.

Then pull it apart.

Next, write the same story without the rhyme.

See how it goes.

Summary

There are various considerations in terms of language for picture books, beginning with the question of whether your vocabulary is age appropriate

The traditional storytelling combination of third person limited narrative voice and past tense is the most common picture book style, and is always safe to use though it's fine to experiment

Rhyme is popular with writers and readers alike, but unpopular with publishers because it's very difficult to translate, and because not many people get it right!

Practice makes perfect, as well as careful editing.

Chapter 7 Putting it all together

Have you written it now? Is your picture book ready to go?

The good news is that if you've planned your story to meet the needs of the child reader and the adult, you've plotted it carefully, you've considered your illustrations, and chosen your words wisely, then your picture book is very close to completion.

But honestly, who would have guessed that writing a tiny little book for people who probably can't even read yet was ever going to be so complicated? I certainly didn't know before I started on my picture book writing journey, as I will prove to you a little later!

It is tricky, I grant you, and it does seem like an awful lot of information to take in. But you're almost there, and many congratulations on coming this far. There are just a couple more stages to go through to pull all the components of your picture book together to make sure that it's going to work, not as a short story with pictures that Billy your best friend sketched for you, but as a professional and publishable picture book.

In a way, we're going to put it all together in this chapter, and then in the final chapter we'll take it all apart again so you can move on to the very final stage of letting it go off on its journey into the great wide world.

In this chapter, you get to have some fun, and you will at last start to recognise your picture book taking shape. This will then throw up a few questions for you, so you may then need to go back to the manuscript and do some tweaking, but you will be very, very glad that you did. It's a fun and simple way to visualise your book as an artefact rather than as a story; being commercial and clinical about it, we might even say that this is when you can begin to see your book as a product (which is what it will be when it's for sale).

So here we go. Here's how you put it all together. It's going to involve some hands-on modelling, so clear yourself a space, have a stretch, crack your knuckles, and off we go.

Creating your artefact

#1 Go to your printer

#2 Remove 8 pieces of plain A4 paper from the paper tray

#3 Return to the space you cleared for yourself

#4 Stack the paper neatly together, and lay it out landscape style in front of you ie lengthwise rather than how it would be for a letter or document

#5 Now fold the whole lot in half, left to right

#6 Press it down so you have a nice sharp crease at one edge

#7 Position the crease/fold on the left hand side

#8 Admire the humble beginnings of your picture book

What you should now have before you is a small plain version of the internals of your picture book. This is your 32 pages of standard picture book format, not including your cover (so if you want to get another piece of A4 and sketch out your cover, feel free!).

Now you'll be able to see that the top page that you're looking at right now, and the bottom page that's lying on the desk or table, are going to be the end papers so they won't have anything much on them. They may even be stuck down as 'wallpaper' if your book is in hardback. In paperback, that top page might possibly be your title page, but your story won't start there.

That means you can more or less ignore the top page. Turn it over. Now you're looking at a double page spread. It's also unlikely that there'll be anything much on that left-hand page besides maybe the imprint page and/or the dedication, and it's more than likely that your title page will be on the right hand page.

Turn the page again. Now you can start your story, if you want to, although you may decide that you would rather start on the right hand page rather than the left, so that you start on a page-turner. Up to you.

So now this is your task:

Take a story that you've written - use your favourite, or the one you think is most evolved if you don't yet have a stand-out fave.

In pencil, start writing your text onto your mock-up. It doesn't matter if you write it exactly as it will appear in the final version - you're not the designer after all, so if you want to put the text right across the double page spread even though that's probably not how it will eventually look, go for it. You're just having a go at breaking down the text into chunks and seeing how they work on the page.

This is just your first stab at it, so don't get too caught up in worrying about the detail - just have a go!

Great!

Now it's time to take another look at it. Here are some things you may want to consider:

Illustrations varied?

It might help now to draw stick figures or sketches of your characters, too, if you like. This can sometimes help you to start to visualise it as a whole rather than a story with pictures - even if you hope, as I always do, that the illustrations will be a lot better than your own attempts!

Evenly or correctly spread?

Is your story fairly evenly spread across the whole book, or is it bunched up in parts? Remember that you don't have to have even numbers of words per double page spread, although you can if you like. You may even end up with a page or DPS with no words on it at all. However, what you may find is that all the interesting parts of your story seem to be in the middle, or that you have too many pages of introduction with heaps of text and then very few words per page after that.

Plotting a bit wobbly?

Okay, so what do you do if you discovered that all your interesting pieces are in the middle? Go back to your three little pigs technique. Was your third peak bigger than your second? Did the

chimney out-strip them all? If so, you can re-jig your text - and then have another go at laying it out on your mock-up, either by making a new one, or by rubbing out parts of your trial run and filling in the gaps on your original mock-up (see why I suggested pencil?).

Story weighted in the wrong place?

What if you've actually ended up with four DPS of introduction and back story, so it hasn't really left enough DPS for the rest of the tale? Then you can now see what you have to do: cut that introduction!

Something else you've noticed?

You may have discovered something else which we will call your 'personal issue': you've actually only got enough text for a 16 page picture book, for instance, or now you see it in true picture book format you can see that the rhyme doesn't lend itself to enough varied illustrations. Hopefully you can see from this what you need to do with it in order to get it in shape.

Identify all your pitfalls and high points, re-jig your story, and then ... guess what? Go back to your mock-up, and try it again. You might have to spread your text out more, or contract it somewhat, or you may have found a place where there should be a page turner but you've written it differently.

Just to give you an example of that particular issue, I can share with you some information from *Curly from Shirley, the Christchurch Dog*:

Now, because this was a special charity book, we found ourselves a little constrained, space-wise. We wanted to insert a DPS covering the story of what was happening to the author during the February 2011 earthquake in Christchurch, NZ, and we also wanted a great spread of photographs of Christchurch itself. Because of that, we ended up with fewer DPS to play with than I would have liked, so our denouement in the story had to go onto the right hand page of one double page spread.

'And Curly went home
With his own piece of pie.'

However, had we not been tight on space, I would have done this particular spread differently to create a page-turner, like this:

And Curly went home ...

DOWN IN RIGHT BOTTOM CORNER TO MAKE THE READER TURN THE PAGE

(next page on left hand side)

... with his own piece of pie

Can you see and hear the difference in intonation? Those last six words are left as a little revelation for the reader - an 'aha' moment, as it's what Curly has been angling for throughout the story. When I re-print Curly for Pear Jam Books as a hardback gift book rather than the current paperback version, this is what I will do with it. For the version that's out for sale at the moment, however, there is information in there that's as important as the story, and it was crucial to give it space.

From creating a mock-up you'll be able to see, I hope, that this is a prime example of the picture book as an artefact - an object, if you like, that needs to be planned in practical terms to make the most of everything within it.

Now for some more examples. I told you at the beginning of this chapter that I would prove to you how little I knew about picture book creation when I started out.

Here is the story of Kave-Tina Rox as I very first wrote it:

Kave-Tina Rox, by Jill Marshall

Cave Drawing of family - KT, Dave-Kave, Mug, Pug, and Grandmug

Another day at the Rox home, and Mug's off to the Trade-Place, again. "New ear-blobs!"

I don't think she'll get any nicer than the ones I gave her for her birthday.

"But I want some of those shiny clear ones, like Ungela dug out of her wall," says Mug.

"Look after your brother, will you? And put on something NICE!"

I sigh. I don't do NICE. Nice is not for me. Mug is For-EVER trying to put me in something golden...or shiny...or stripy.

But this is me. Kave-Tina Sabre Moonchild Rox. K.T. for short. Me, I've got lots of hair. When Mug messes it with it, I look like this...or this...or even this.

YAK!

That's what I like to look like. A yak, rufty and tufty and covered in hair. My Pug says I am part girl, part woolly mammoth. Fine by me! I'll have scrunchies on my bunches, but that's it. I'm perfect just as I am.

My little brother is not perfect, no. He is a nightmare in a Footboulder shirt. Dave-Kave Ptera Rainschild Rox is Pug's biggest fan, and he always wears the shirt with PYTHON PYTHON PYTHON PYTHON PYTHON PYTHON on it that Pug wears for the Prehistoric Pythons. Too many pythons. It's WAYYYYYY too long and he falls over it all the time. Sometimes I wish Pug played in goal.

"What are you doing, Dave-Kave?" I shout from my room.

"Nothing," he says.

I don't like nothing. Nothing is not good. Nothing is scary. Nothing is Dangerous.

I get downstairs to find him lying under our pet wolf, waiting for Wind to dribble on him.

"Euw, Dave-Kave! Get out of there!"

"But I'm hot," he whinges. Again.

I drag him out to the spring. "Water is what we have when we're hot."

"Wind was watering me."

"You are a roach," I say, and dunk him in the pool.

"Ungghghg, Ighhh nnn shshshsh."

"Okay, you're a fish. Say it, don't spray it," I tell him.

We go home through the big gates Mug had put in to keep Pug's Footboulder fans away. I offered to put Dave-Kave outside as he is Pug's only fan. Mug was NOT happy, but was not as NOT happy as Grandpug who lives with us in a little Grandpug Hole.

"You have hung gates from the funeral pyres beneath which my ancestors are buried."

Mug thought they wouldn't mind as they're dead. I thought they were stars, but what do I know?

“Can we at least lose the Pteradactyls?” pleaded Grandpug. “They’ll upset the ancestors.”

“But they’re classy!” That’s what Mug thinks. So that’s that.

The Pteras rattle their tethers as the mammoths open the gates, and pointy sticks drop off the gates onto our heads.

“Wanna play,” moans Dave-Kave.

“Pythons and High-reachers?”

“Boring.”

“Your favourite – guess where Kave-Tina’s face is?”

“Don’t wanna see your face.”

“How about throwing sticks for Wind!”

“He eats them.”

I chuck gate sticks at him. “Well, chase them yourself then. I’m going to draw.”

Upstairs, I lie on my floor. There’s a rabbit hole where I can see the stars. Well, when it’s night time I can. Now I can just see orange, orange sunshine.

Although it is getting pretty dark.

“Dave-Kave, what are you doing?”

“Nothing,” he shouts. And then he laughs.

It’s gone dark.

There’s a funny smell and it’s not Wind.

And Dave-Kave is laughing.

I am out of my room like a spat pebble.

“What in the mountain is that?”

“Dunno, but it’s hot.” Dave-Kave isn’t laughing any more. And Wind shoots off through the gates past mad jumping Pteras and Mammoths. “K.T....HELP!”

Quick as a flash, I lie down. “Grab the scrunchies on my bunches!”

I pull, and heave, and struggle like a fish on dry land until Dave-Kave appears next to me.

“We’re stuck!” he wails.

“Into my room.” It’s a very long way down from the wall-hole. “Told you’re we’re stuck!”

“No, we’re not.” I flop my head through the wall-hole. “Climb down, Dave-Kave!”

Not stuck any more, he clambers over my head, across my shoulders and down to the very tips of my hair. From there it’s a very short “plop” to the ground. “Hey, I’m down!”

“Great, now can you...”

He runs off to find Wind.

“Okay, pet wolf, sister. Sister, pet wolf. Which one should you rescue?” I yell at his disappearing pythony back. “Thanks a lot, Dave-Kave!”

So now I am stuck. My room is dark as an armpit and even smellier. And it’s WAYYYY too hot to get back downstairs.

“Okay, out you go, Rox,” I tell myself, and with a mighty shove off I’m out through the wall-hole ...

... I get an even softer landing than Dave-Kave. See, I TOLD Mug my hair is great, just as it is!

But just as I’m dusting down my hands, a little face appears upstairs.

“I told you! I knew those ancestors wouldn’t like your gates!”

GRANDPUG! AAAAAAGHGHGHG!

The mammoths are bolting but I lasso one with one of my bunches. “Okay, mammoth, you’re coming with me.”

Up at the spring, I make him fill up with water until he’s the size of two mammoths, and maybe Wind. “Now back, before it’s too late!”

Sadly, Mug’s lovely gates are melting and the Pteradactyls have long since gazoumped. Grandpug’s face is disappearing.

“Spray it, mammoth – spray it!” I yell. I kick his sides like fingers on puffed-out cheeks, and water sprinkles all over the hot red house. Before too long, it’s over.

Well, almost. There’s certainly a crowd at our gates now, but they are not Pug fans. Mug’s friends all stand around with their arms folded over their chests, or wrapped round my Mug.

“Kave-Tina Sabre Moonchild Rox, what in the name of the mountain have you done?”

I am just about to explode when Grandpug pops up. “She saved me from joining the critters under those stones, that’s what!”

“Oh,” says Mug. Somehow she still seems a bit disappointed.

“You’ll simply HAVE to decorate,” says Mug’s friend Ungela.

“Oh, yes.” She’s a bit more cheerful now.

“And look at this!”

I can’t believe it. Dave-Kave, the nightmare in a Footboulder shirt, staggers out of the cave with his hand out.

I should slap it, but then I see...

“Sparkly clear stones!” Mum goes pink with happiness. “Dave-Kave, my clever boy!”

I sniff.

“You could learn from him, K.T. Please try and stay out of trouble. Why can’t you just be a normal girl?”

Well, I like that.

Still, I think that hot stuff might be useful for everyone in the future, so I will find out how Dave-Kave made it. Which is not very girly, maybe.

And in the meantime, all this black dusty goo is perfect for drawing. Hmmmmm.

(Drawings of Dave-Kave getting his just desserts in various forms!)

Here’s what it turned into after my first pass at turning it into a picture book rather than a short story with pictures:

Kave-Tina Rox: Spray it, don’t say it! by Jill Marshall

Pages 3 and 4

Cave drawing of the Rox family caves, with one central cave, one off to either side, and another off to each side up two flights of stairs.

The family:

Kave-Tina Rox, with enormous bunches down to her feet, just caught at the ends in scrunchies, and only her nose and mouth visible.

Dave-Kave Rox, little brother, with a footballer’s haircut and a too-big football shirt with the Prehistoric Pythons emblem

Pug – bigger version of Dave-Kave

Mug – glamorous shopping cave-woman

Grandmug – wizened and hairy, far more like Kave-Tina than the rest.

Acknowledgements

Title page

Page 6 and 7

When I wake up and come down the steps from my sleep cave, I see that SOMETHING HAS CHANGED. Suddenly we have big gates, where yesterday there was just space.

Grandmug isn't very happy about them, and Mug is arguing with her. Maybe one day I will argue like this with my own Mug, but right now I am not allowed to even answer back, not even under my breath.

“Did you have to hang them off the funeral pyres?” says Grandmug. “All your Granddugs are buried under there.”

“They won't mind. They're dead and turned into stars,” says Mug. “And the gates will keep all the Footboulder fans out.”

Kave-Tina thinking about her ancestors disappearing up to the heavens in star trails.

Page 8

Pug is a professional Footboulder player. Being honest, the Prehistoric Pythons are not very good. I think my brother Dave-Kave is their only fan (and a nightmare in a Footboulder shirt). I want to point out that he's actually IN the cave, but Mug is *not in the mood*.

“Can we at least lose the Pteradactyls?” pleads Grandmug.

Chaotic game of Football going on with a large boulder as the ball.

Page 9

But Mug just waves. She's off to the Trading-Stones. Again. “New ear-blobs! I want some of those shiny clear ones, like Ungela dug out of her wall,” says Mug. “Look after your brother, Kave-Tina. And do something with your hair!”

Noooooo! Mug is For-EVER trying to sort my hair out, and when she messes with it, I look like ... this...or this...or even this.

Kave-Tina with a huge pile of hair on her head, with enormous Princess Leia type danishes over her ears, and with a ridiculous head of curls, all with a very pained expression.

YAK!

Page 10 and 11

I am part girl, part woolly mammoth. I'll have scrunchies on my bunchies, but that's it. I help Grandmug back upstairs as her hips are funny. They don't LOOK funny, with smiley faces on them or anything, but Pug says thank the stars she's not his mother, as hips like that would ruin his Footboulder career. Personally I don't think his very own hips are doing him much good either.

I tuck Grandmug up for a nap, and for a long time there is silence. "What are you doing, Dave-Kave?" I shout downstairs.

"Nothing," he says.

I don't like nothing. Nothing is not good. Nothing is scary. Nothing is Dangerous.

Images of the kinds of atrocities Dave-Kave gets up to when he says 'nothing'.

Page 12 and 13

I find him lying in the sparkly dust under our pet wolf, waiting for Wind to dribble on him.

"Euw, Dave-Kave! Get out of there!"

"But I'm hot," he whinges. After Footboulder, whinging is his fave thing. Getting me into trouble is his third fave thing, or possibly top of the list.

I drag him out to the spring. "When we're hot, we have WATER."

"Wind was watering me."

"You are a roach," I say, and dunk him in the pool.

"Nunghh, Ighhh nnn shshshsh."

"Okay, you're a fish. Say it, don't spray it," I tell him.

Page 14 and 15

Sticks raining down from the tops of the gates onto their heads

The Pteras rattle their tethers as the mammoths open the gates to let us back in. "Ow! Wanna play," moans Dave-Kave.

"Pythons and High-reachers?" *snakes and ladders*

“Boring.”

“Your favourite – guess where Kave-Tina’s face is?” *gruesome peek-a-boo*

“Don’t wanna see your face.”

“How about throwing sticks for Wind?” *The wolf chasing what is obviously a leg.*

“He eats them.”

I chuck gate sticks at him. “Well, chase them yourself then. I’m going to draw.”

Page 16 and 17

Kave-tina’s bedroom – typical girl’s room although it is a cave with a hole in the roof.

I love drawing. It is the best thing, after persuading the Pteradactyls to give me a fly.

Upstairs, I lie on my floor with a stick. There’s a rabbit hole where I can see all the Granddugs and other stars, when my eyes aren’t full of the gritty stuff that falls in through the hole. And, of course, when it’s night-time. Now I can just see orange, orange sunshine.

Although it is suddenly getting pretty dark.

“Dave-Kave, what are you doing?”

“Nothing,” he shouts. And then he laughs.

It’s gone black.

There’s a funny smell that is not Wind or Grandmug.

And Dave-Kave is laughing.

Bottom right, black smoke billowing into Kave-tina’s bedroom..

Page 18 and 19

I am out of my room like a spat pebble. “What in the mountain is that?”

“Dunno, but it’s hot.” Dave-Kave isn’t laughing any more. And Wind shoots off through the gates, past mad jumping Pteras and Mammoths. “Kave-Tina...HELP!”

Quick as a flash, I lie down at the top of the stairs. “Grab the scrunchies on my bunches!”

I pull and heave and flap like a fish on dry land until Dave-Kave appears next to me.

“We’re stuck!” he wails.

The entire place is filled with black swirling smoke, and a fire rages below.

Page 20 and 21

“Into my room.”

It’s a very long way down from the wall-hole. “Told you we’re stuck!”

“No, we’re not.” I flop my head through the wall-hole. “Climb down, Dave-Kave!”

He is so not stuck any more. He clammers over my head, across my shoulders and down to the very tips of my hair. From there it's a very short 'plop' to the ground. "Hey, I'm down!"

"Great, now can you..."

He runs off to find Wind.

"Okay, little bro," I yell at his disappearing Prehistoric Pythons shirt. "Pet wolf, sister. Sister, pet wolf. Which one should you rescue?"

Dave-Kave thinks he knows. But he is wrong.

So now I am stuck. My room is as dark as Grandmug's armpit and even smellier. And it's WAYYYY too hot to get back downstairs. There's only one way out...

Kave-tina lowering Dave-Kave to the ground on the end of her bunches, through the 'window'.

Page 22 and 23

... and with a mighty shove off I'm out through the wall-hole....

... and I get an even softer landing than Dave-Kave.

See, I TOLD Mug my hair is great, just as it is!

She parachutes down to the floor, floating on her hair.

But just as I'm dusting down my hands, I hear a little croaky voice. "It's those gates! The ancestors have cursed us!"

GRANDMUG! AAAAAAGHGHGHG!

Page 24 and 25

The mammoths are bolting, but I lasso one with one of my bunchies. "Okay, mammoth, you're coming with me."

Up at the spring, I make him fill up with water until he's the size of two whole mammoths and a half, then jump on his back. Sadly, Mug's lovely gates are dissolving, the Pteradactyls have long since gazooped, and Grandmug's face is disappearing into the black.

"Spray it, mammoth – spray it!"

I kick his sides, and water sprinkles all over the hot red cave.

Before long, it's over.

Well, almost.

Kave-tina has just invented a fire engine/hose.

Page 26 and 27

For the first time EVER there is a crowd at our gates, but they are not Pug's adoring Footboulder fans. It is my Mug and her friends, giving me THE LOOK. "Kave-Tina Sabre Moon Rox, what in the name of the mountain have you done?"

I am just about to explode when Grandmug pops up. "Saved me from joining the critters under those stones, that's what!"

"Oh," says Mug. Somehow she still seems disappointed.

"You'll simply HAVE to decorate," says Mug's friend Ungela.

"Oh, yes." She's a bit more cheerful now.

"And look at this!"

Page 28 and 29

The fire on the sandy floor has created glass, which Dave-Kave is holding before his eyes.

I can't believe it. Dave-Kave, the nightmare in a Footboulder shirt, staggers out of the cave with his hands in front of two very big buggy eyes. I should snatch big-time, but then I see that he's holding...

"Sparkly clear stones!" Mug is pink with happiness. "Dave-Kave, my clever boy!"

I sniff.

"You could learn from him, Kave-Tina. Please try and stay out of trouble! Why can't you just be a normal girl?"

Well, I like that.

If I was a normal girl, we wouldn't have made the HOT STUFF. And the SHINY CLEAR that will stop dirt falling on me through my rabbit hole, while I look up at the stars. We might not have a Dave-Kave or a Grandmug...

Images of cooking over a fire, glass in the sky-light, grandmug disappearing under the funeral pyres...

I like being me. Kave-Tina Rox. Part girl, part woolly mammoth.

And look at all this black gooey dust, just perfect for drawing...

End papers – *Kave-tina's cave drawings of what she'd like to do to Dave-Kave.*

As you can see, by this time I was getting the idea of a picture book, but what I'd started to realise was that it was still too old for a picture book, too long for a picture book, and too much based around the brother and the fire and so on for a picture book. There was also some repeated techniques that could be improved for more drama (straight over the cliff, straight over the edge). The emphasis had to be on Kave-Tina. So then I mocked it up ... and this is the version that was finally contracted for publication by Hachette:

My poem, by Kave-Tina Rox

I'm Kave-Tina Rox

With my scrunchies in my bunches

And I throw them over my shoulder

On my boulder, eating Krunchees...

Okay. I am not very good at poems. ☹

But I am very, very, very, million times very good at drawing. ☺. Look:

This is where I live, in the Rox Family Box,

With Mug...

And Pug...

And Dave-Kave, my big brother. He thinks I am just a girrrrrrl and a hairy nuisance.

Here is me, with my pet called Squirt.

We look at lot alike. Pug says I am part-girl, part woolly-mammoth, which must be why Squirt is my best friend. Mug is always trying to get me to do things with my hair like this... or this...or this...

But I say YAK! Then Dave-Kave will NEVER let me play with him (and his friends Grunt-who-never-speaks and Belcher-who-burps).

*No. It's scrunchies in my bunches for me, and that's IT. My hair is great.
Like today...*

"Dave-Kave," I said, "can Squirt and me play polo with you?"

“You’re too short to scoop,” he said. “You’ll make the teams uneven.”

*But four was better than three. And who managed to get the best shot and win the game for him?
That’s right. His little sister.*

“Can I play snakes and ladders with you?” I asked.

*“You’re too young, you’ll spoil it,” he said. And he climbed all the way to the top of the highest
ladder just to prove how cool it is to be a big big big big brother.*

But then he couldn’t get down. And who had to help him? Yes. His hairy little sister.

And then he said I couldn’t play Footboulder with them.

*Dave-Kave shook his head and said no, no, no. “You’re too little and weak. The boulder will
hurt your foot.”*

“It huuu-urts my foot, and look how big I am,” said Belcher.

*So who was it who found her hairbrush, and made a new boulder that would not hurt the foot of
a teeny tiny flimsy wimsy flea? Correct. Dave-Kave’s hairy little nuisance sister - that’s who.*

*But even after all that, Dave-Kave STILL wouldn’t let me go camping with him and Belcher and
Grunt, up the mountain where I’ve always wanted to go.*

Squirt and me went off for a sulk.

*“Never mind them,” I told Squirt. “We’ll make our own camp. It will be better than
theirs. So much better my brother will cry and fall over in his own teardrop puddles. And then
his friends will laugh at him and Dave-Kave will be soooooooo sorry he was mean to me.”*

*But we didn’t make our own camp. Because when we got to the spring at the top of hill,
guess what we found? Dave-Kave, Belcher and Grunt, in trouble, again... Their camp fire had
gone WILD.*

*“He-ulp!” yelled Belcher, and “Grunt!” shouted Grunt and “Get Pug!” hollered Dave-
Kave.*

But they didn’t need Pug.

Off we went,

Hairy and Scary –

*straight...
over...
the cliff!*

*Well, not Squirt, because he stayed right there and put out the fire. Clever mammoth.
And clever me, saving three big gormless boys all at once.*

Not that Dave-Kave thought so.

“That was burrrrilliant!” said Belcher.

“Grunt!” grinned Grunt.

“Tch,” said Dave-Kave. “I could have done that.”

He so could not. His hair is cut like a footboulder player. And what use is that?

Hmmm. Think it’s time I helped him PROPERLY.

And then I may need a snack, because after all...

I’m Kave-Tina Rox

With my scrunchies in my bunchies

And I throw them over my shoulder

On my boulder, eating Krunchees...

Yeah, and that Dave-Kave can’t make up really really really good poems either.

Thank goodness I’m just me.

THE END

Some interesting points to note here are that:

This has gone from 1140 words in the original version to 700 in this final version;

The final version was cut further still so that the word-count of the published book is at about 635 words;

The emphasis of each of the ‘activities’ changed from the first version to the last meaning that the illustrator would have more to do;

I was less directive with the illustrations by the final version than in either of the other versions (and believe me, there were many more versions along the way!).

The process I went through was exactly the same as the process you are probably going through during this picture book journey. First of all I had an idea. Then I wrote a short story that would be fun with pictures. Next, I realised it would have to be shorter - a lot shorter - and better suited to younger children, which meant that I had to change the story somewhat. I considered what illustrations might go with it, to the extent of perhaps being a little demanding! Then I mocked it up into the format it might appear when published, and discovered that the pictures would need to vary more, that the text could still be cut, and that I could create more page-turners by laying it out differently over the DPS.

In the last chapter, we’ll add all the finishing touches, and your beautiful, amazing picture book will be all set to head off onto the next stage of its journey. Do you get a tingle of anticipation? I do! Good times lay ahead ...

SOMETHING TO TRY

Guess what I'd like you to do now?

You know your story. You know how long it needs to be, where the peaks and troughs need to appear, what your wonderful 'chimney' is going to consist of and how that might involve a page-turner or two.

Now it's time to play.

Keep going with your mock-up until you've got a very, very firm idea of how it will all pull together as an artifact, even if you have no real idea of how the illustrations might look.

Summary

- **You can create a 32 page picture book format (excluding cover) by folding together eight sheets of A4 paper - or A3 paper if you have some and you'd like to see how your book might look in 'real' size;**
- **The first couple of pages will be for end papers, imprint pages, dedications and so on, so your story will probably start on what appears to be page 4 or 5;**
- **Mocking up your story by blocking out the text on the various double page spreads can help you to get a clear idea of where your story is too heavy, too light, or just not right!**
- **You can sketch in some illustrations, even in stick figure form, to make it feel like a picture book and that will also let you know where the story is going to be too static to allow for much variation in the pictures;**
- **Keep playing with it until it works, even if it means re-shaping your story. You'll be glad in the end that you turned it into an artifact that publishers and readers can see as a 'product', while you know that it's still your own fabulous creation.**

How to Write Picture Books Chapter 8

Pixie Dust

You've made it.

Right through to the end of your book on how to write a picture book.

Not just how to write it, in fact, but how to make sure your book appeals at a couple of points on that 'reader triangle', where to get ideas from, how to ensure you're fitting the age group, whether you're writing for girls or boys, how you might manage the illustration side of it, whether to rhyme or not and if you are writing in rhyme, how to do it properly ... It's been a busy few chapters!

So now I'd like to share with you the final few magic spells to cast over your book so that it all comes together as one perfectly written manuscript. I'm afraid some of this is going to sound less exciting in reality than the thought of waving a magic wand around and creating magic. However, the truth is that these are the very final stages that many, many picture writers overlook, and because of this they don't present their manuscript in the best way possible.

And what are those final sprinkles of fairy wonderment that are needed to polish your manuscript to perfection?

Punctuation. Grammar. Editing and layout. Having something new.

Yes, I'm sorry to have to bring everyone back to earth when you've been so involved in your fabulous story, but as a manuscript assessor, editor and publisher, I can honestly and reliably inform you that there are a number of things to do with picture book manuscripts which cause the heart to sink.

I've mentioned most of these before, but just to remind you and perhaps add a couple more, here are heart-sinkers:

More stories about animals, trees, flowers, fish that are particular to the country you live in, because so many have been written and published already. You could get away with it if your story is really distinctive and you've taken a whole new approach to your particular choice of flora or fauna, but you will have to make sure that it really stands out from the crowd. Oh, and that it's perfect in every other way. Keep reading!

Manuscripts with long pre-ambls that explain where the story came from (especially if the preamble mentions how your kids/grandkids/schoolclass just *loved* it) and how it's going to lift the hearts and consciousness of children of all ages everywhere. You may well be right, but please let the reader decide for themselves - they will base their decision on the strength of your story and its viability as a picture book. Your lovely introduction, rather than making them want to read it more, could possibly put them off. One thing I have discovered over many years of dealing with and now being a publisher is that, most of the time, they do know what they're doing.

Poor rhyme. Rhyme that doesn't scan. Rhyme that forces the story into very odd shapes. Rhyme that doesn't actually rhyme. Rhyme rhyme rhyme.

Rhyme, when well-executed, causes the publisher's heart to sing rather than sink, but please make sure that you've got it absolutely spot on before you send it off. And please, please don't inform them that in your view, picture books should be in rhyme because kids love it and just look at the popularity of Dr Seuss/Julia Donaldson/Lynley Dodd ...

It's not that they don't like rhyme per se, and if you really are the next Dr Seuss then go right ahead. It's just that they don't like rhyme that makes them cringe. And so much of it does. Sorry to be blunt, but this is a major heart-sink and if you can possibly avoid it as the reason for your book being rejected, then I'd give it a go.

Talking animals that converse with humans in an uncomfortable mix of reality and fantasy. It's not a problem to have talking animals if they're talking to other talking animals only,

effectively as if they, too, were humans. Just furry ones. It's also okay if your talking creature is an animal that might talk anyway (which basically rules out most beasts and leaves us with parrots and some other bird species, and possibly chimps and dolphins).

What doesn't go down well is animals suddenly talking to their human friends. Imagine the disappointment for a three year old when they work out that it doesn't actually happen! The basic rule is: if it's fantasy or the animals live in a human-type world but only talk to each other, that's okay; if it's reality and the animals are pets or livestock, then don't let them talk.

Illustrations by someone other than you, or even by you if they're nice pictures rather than proper illustrations. The same with too many directions for the illustrator. I know that you know all this; just reminding you so you can consider it in your editing.

Poor punctuation, spelling and grammar. These cause many, many heart-sinks. Most editors and publishers are very good at punctuation, spelling and grammar, and it's a matter of personal pain to them when any of them are massacred. In fact, let's talk about that now ... starting with ellipses, which is dot dot dot as I just put before the brackets. Always three dots only, please, with a space either side like this ... (UK) or no space ... followed by space like this... (US).

Punctuation

Take a look at this list of sums - what do you notice about them?

$$11 - 3 = 8$$

$$4 + 6 = 12$$

$$10 - 4 = 6$$

$$3 + 5 = 8$$

$$5 \times 2 = 10$$

What you will probably have spotted is that one of the sums is wrong. I just tested myself on it again, and even though I wrote these sums myself as an exercise, I still found myself dismissing everything that came after the mistake as it's likely to be wrong too.

No matter that 80% of those sums are accurate - one of them is incorrect and suddenly you can't really see anything else.

That's how it is for trained editors when they find grammatical errors. From that point on, it's all they can see! I've assessed hundreds of manuscripts, and can assure you that this really is the case. It can deter the publisher from reading your book, so it's crucial to get it right. If you know that this is a troublesome area for you, then I would strongly recommend that you hire an editor or proof reader to fix it for you. There will inevitably be typos in the most professional productions of books, even after the ministrations of a proof reader, but do your best to keep them to a minimum.

In the meantime, some overall guidelines for you:

It doesn't matter if you use double speech marks "like this" or single speech marks 'like this', as long as you use them consistently. I always used to write my dialogue with double speech marks "like so", but then I noticed that the publisher often changed them all to single speech marks 'like these', and so I started to use singles myself anyway. It's up to you; just make sure that you stick with the same form throughout.

Whichever speech marks you've used - double or single - use the other form as quotation marks for any quotes. So if you've used double speech marks "like so", use single quotation marks 'like so' and vice versa.

Start each new piece of dialogue or speaker on a new line. Yes, even in picture books. In fact, especially in picture books, as every word is going to earn its place.

There must always be a punctuation mark at the end of a piece of dialogue, be it a comma, full stop, question mark or exclamation mark (or occasionally a dash - or ellipses ...). There is never a space before the speech marks close. So not:

"Can I come in? I need to use the toilet" said Angie.

But

"Can I come in? I need to use the toilet," said Angie.

The punctuation mark at the end of the piece of dialogue must **always** be inside the closing speech marks. There is no occasion in which the comma or full stop appears outside the closing speech marks.

So not

“Can I come in? I need to use the toilet”, said Angie.

But

“Can I come in? I need to use the toilet,” said Angie.

Ellipses - I’ve mentioned these already. Please be aware, too, that they should be used sparingly rather than each time you want to infer a pause, or you, the author, are just stopping to have a think!

So not

“Can I come in I need to use the toilet ..” said Angie.

But

“Can I come in? I need to use the toilet ...” said Angie.

In laying out your dialogue and your manuscript overall, you either indent each new speaker or paragraph but then don’t miss a line between, or you don’t indent each new speaker or paragraph but you do miss a line between. It can make your picture book look very spread out, and writers sometimes feel nervous about this. Don’t worry; it’s what the publisher will be expecting so they can read it easily, and as most manuscripts are sent electronically these days you’re not going to be wasting too many trees. There are examples in this chapter so you know what to do. Either is fine, but as usual, whichever you’ve chosen, stick to it throughout.

Avoid the tendency to find new ways of saying ‘he said’, although the occasional ‘he muttered’, ‘he screamed’ or ‘he whispered’ is fine. Try not to add adverbs to these like ‘he whispered quietly’.

Verbs like smiling, grimacing, gesturing, winking and similar are not form of speaking, so if you use verbs like these they usually make up a separate sentence and can't come immediately after a comma and close of speech marks.

So not

“Can I come in? I need to use the toilet,” grimaced Angie.

But

“Can I come in? I need to use the toilet.” Angie grimaced.

Mum and Dad only have capitals when they are being used directly as the character's name; otherwise if you are talking about 'his mum' or 'my dad' then they are lower case.

So not

“Can I come in, mum? I need to use the toilet,” she called to her Mother.

But

“Can I come in, Mum? I need to use the toilet,” she called to her mother

Not too many exclamation marks, please. They don't necessarily add drama. Often, they just add overkill. The same with trying to make your text interesting so snaky words look like snakes and so on. The publisher will get it, and will do it, without you messing up your manuscript to show them what to do. Instead of sprinkling exclamation marks and a never—used- before font, observe the instructions in the next point.

Strong and sizzling

Another piece of advice which will enable you to make your language sparkle, either in the dialogue between the speech marks, or in your straight narrative, is to make your verbs strong and active, and make your nouns specific.

Let's look at an example.

He went to the shop and got a book.

Not very exciting, is it? We'll attack the verbs first. The verbs in this sentence are 'went' and 'got'.

*He **went** to the shop and **got** a book.*

What strong, active verbs could we use in place of 'went'?

And instead of 'took'?

Insert those into your sentence, and then we'll improve our nouns. The first noun is actually a pronoun - he. Make that specific. Give him a name - perhaps one of your names that you created in the character development chapter.

The other nouns are 'shop' and 'book'.

*He went the **shop** and got a **book**.*

We need to make those specific, so which shop is it? Does it have a name? Could you make up a name? The same goes for 'book'; which book? The magic book? A German dictionary? A pamphlet on dragons?

Now put all those options together into the new sentence. It might be like the following:

Janice cycled to the Corner Bookshop and bought Kave-Tina Rox.

Or:

Jasper raced to Stories Galore and hid the last copy of The Never-to-be-Read Book.

You will probably have come up with something completely different! Whatever choices you've made, I'll guarantee that it's a lot more interesting than *He went to the shop and got a book*. You can also use this technique for editing after you've written something. Go through and check whether you've used the same words several times over (without meaning to - obviously if you're repeating it as part of the story, that's fine!).

For instance, if you've used 'walked' a few times, you could try 'skipped' or 'strode' or 'shimmied' instead. You may find you've said 'looked' several times. Go on, check. You'd be amazed.

The one time to avoid inventing new strong verbs, as mentioned above, is to replace 'he said' or 'said Mummy'.

Putting it back together

In the last chapter, you spent some time mocking up your picture book so you can get an idea of how it feels as an artefact.

However, that was just to let you, the author, embrace it as a picture book. The person who's perhaps going to publish it for you or turn it into a picture book won't need to see it in that way.

Your next job, then, is to go back to your mock-up, and then write out your story according to what's on the page as I've done here with my story about mad, bad puppy, Chewy Lewie.

Note that the dog is not the main character, and doesn't talk! Word-count is just over 600.

Title Chewy Lewie, by Jill Marshall

Page 1 Cover Page

Page 2-3 End Papers

Page 4 Prelims: Dedication

Page 5 Title Page

Page 6/7

*Chewy Lewie was my mad, bad puppy. I loved him a LOT. But
Chewy Lewie was always nibbling things. Sometimes he chewed...*

Page 8/9

*...until there was nothing left. He chewed newspapers before Mummy read them. Tables as we
were eating.*

Page 10/11

He even chewed the curtains. Right to the top!

“That’s it!” cried Mummy. “That mad, bad puppy has to stop! Or ...”

Page 12

“... he’ll have to go!”

*I didn’t want him to go. He might be mad and he might be bad. But he was mine. And I loved
him a LOT.*

Page 13

We sat in the kitchen for a chat. “Chewy Lewie, you must stop chewing!” I told him.

But he wasn't listening. He was too busy munching my shoe.

Page 14

"No, Chewy Lewie! No!" I said. "Not my shoe!"

Chewy Lewie wagged his tail. We buried the shoe at the bottom of the kitchen bin.

"What happened to your shoe?" asked Mummy.

"I lost it," I said.

Page 15

Chewy Lewie wagged his tail.

"Are you sure it wasn't Chewy Lewie, that mad, bad puppy?" asked Mummy.

"No," I said with a gulp. "It was me."

Page 16/17

"HMMMMM," said Mummy. "I don't like puppies who chew. But even worse are little boys who tell lies. Go and play in your bedroom."

"Now I'm in trouble too!" I said. "Chewy Lewie, you must stop chewing!"

But Chewy Lewie wasn't listening. He was too busy chomping on my best jumper.

Page 18/19

“No, Chewy Lewie. No!” I said. “Not my best jumper!”

Chewy Lewie wagged his tail.

We hid the jumper at the bottom of the linen basket. But Mummy soon found it. “What happened to your best jumper?”

Page 20

“I caught it on a nail,” I squeaked.

“Are you sure it wasn’t Chewy Lewie, that mad, bad puppy?” asked Mummy.

“No,” I said.

Page 21

“Hmmmm,” said Mummy. “Now, I don’t like puppies who chew. But even worse are little boys who tell lies. And hide things from their mummy. Now go and play in the garden.”

Page 22

“Now I’m in even more trouble!” I said. “Chewy Lewie, you must stop chewing!”

But Chewy Lewie wasn’t listening. He was too busy biting ...

Page 23/24

... the postman’s leg.

The postman ran in the shed and locked himself in.

Chewy Lewie didn't wag his tail. And he didn't keep chewing. He stayed at the shed door, growling.

Page 25

"What's happened to your dog?" asked Mummy.

"He chewed the leg of the postman who's locked himself in the shed," I said.

"The postman's locked in the shed?" asked Mummy.

"Yes," I said.

Page 26

"HMMMMM," said Mummy. "I don't like puppies who chew. But even worse are little boys who tell lies. And hide things. And tell their mummy stories to stay out of trouble."

"But I'm not!" I said.

Page 27

"You must be!" said Mummy. "The postman doesn't come on Sundays!"

"So who's that in the shed?" I asked.

Page 28/29

It was Back-Fence Benny, the famous garden burglar.

“That’s a very good, very clever dog you’ve got there!” said the policeman who came to fetch Benny. “Would he like to come and work with me?”

Chewy Lewie wagged his tail.

“No, Chewy Lewie! No!” I said.

“No, Officer,” smiled Mummy. “That’s Chewy Lewie, our mad, bad puppy. And he belongs right here with us.”

But Chewy Lewie wasn’t listening. He was too busy chewing...

Page 30

... his special thank-you bone. He’s still my mad, bad puppy. And we love him a LOT.

The end

That’s one way you might send off your manuscript so the publisher can see that you’ve thought about it all. However, as you’ve now polished and pixie-dusted your story to glorious effervescence, you don’t even need to format it in that way unless you want to. Here’s is my picture book about Ickle Pickle (whom you met in the rhyme and language chapter) in exactly the way I submitted it.

Poor Ickle Pickle

This is Pickle.

Pickle is really ickle.

One day, Ickle Pickle wakes up feeling funny peculiar. ‘Ickle Pickle is sickle,’ Pickle tells Mummy.

‘Poor Ickle Pickle,’ says Mummy, and she snuggles Pickle close for a special Mummy Huggle.

'Ickle Pickle is sickle,' Pickle tells Grandma.

'I know just what you need,' says Grandma. 'Here's a shiny new nickel for a poorly Ickle Pickle.'

'Will it make me better?' says Ickle Pickle.

'Maybe. It is magic,' says Grandma. 'If you take it to a shop, it can turn into a choccy.'
Then Grandma peers at Ickle Pickle. 'Is that a freckle? Lots of freckles? Right there, on Pickle's neck.'

Mummy peers too. 'That's not a freckle. It's a horrid nasty speckle.'

'I've got speckles on my neckle?' cries Pickle. 'Oh, heckle!'

'Ickle Pickle is sickle with a speckle,' Pickle tells the doctor. 'Will I have to go to hospickle?'

The doctor smiles. 'I don't think so, Ickle Pickle. But let me have a checkle of the speckle on your neckle. Hold your breath – this might just tickle.'

And it does tickle Ickle Pickle. At first she giggles and jiggles as the doctor has a checkle of her special Pickle speckles, but then it gets too itchy, and the scratching makes her twitchy.

'You're very, very hot, and you're quite a funny colour,' says the doctor. 'I know just what you need. Home to bed for Ickle Pickle.'

'Ickle Pickle is sickle with a speckle and a tickle,' Pickle tells Daddy on the phone as they drive home.

'Poor Ickle Pickle,' says Daddy. 'What's wrong?'

'I've got a speckle on my neckle and a tickle that got itchy, and I'm feeling very sickle. Very, very, very sickle.'

'I know just what you need,' says Daddy. 'I shall bring you something special from my trip.'

But ... 'Too late!' shouts Ickle Pickle.

And she's very, very sickle, in a puddle round her middle in the car seat, and all across the window, where the sick slides in a trickly slick of Ickle Pickle sickle.

'Oh, poor Ickle Pickle,' says Mummy.

'Ickle Pickle's very sickle, and I need to cry a lickle,' says Pickle. And then she cries a LOT.

'Come on, Ickle Pickle - I know just what you need,' says Mummy.

So Mummy bathes poor Pickle with a great big smiley smile and a worried little frown. She lies Pickle on her bed, and she pats poor Pickle's shoulder and she strokes poor Pickle's head.

'Ickle Pickle's really sickle,' says Ickle Pickle sleepily.

'Poor Ickle Pickle,' says Mummy. 'You'll be better soon.'

When she wakes up, later, later, later, Ickle Pickle runs to the mirror.

No speckle.

She pats her sickle tummy.

No tickle.

And she wants to eat some choccy that she's bought with ...

Grandma's nickel!

'Mummy!' she shouts. 'Ickle Pickle isn't sickle!'

'Clever Pickle,' says Mummy.

'I'm still Ickle, though ... aren't I, Mummy?'

'Yes, you are. And no matter how big you get,' says Mummy, 'you will always be my very own Ickle Pickle.'

And Ickle Pickle smiles, because she knows that even when she's not sickle, she's still special.

A special Ickle Pickle.

That's who.

The end.

Word-count: 533

There you are - plain and simple, with everything the publisher needs to be able to work out if it fits their house style, what the illustrations might look like and who they might get to illustrate it, and even what or who Pickle might be! She's a little girl in my eyes, but it would be quite easy to

make it 'he' instead - and several people have thought that what they were visualising was a gherkin!

By the way, please do note that the italics in all my examples throughout this book are to assist you in spotting that these are examples. I do not submit manuscripts in italics – just a plain old, straight up and down, 12 point Times New Roman.

That's how I've created this book, too. And we are nearly – so nearly – at the end of our journey. Can you smell the ocean? There's a little twist in the tail of the tale, in just another page or so. Beyond that page, you are free. Free to fly. Free to write. Free to create your own marvellous picture book stories.

Have fun. I know I have.

Jillx

SOMETHING TO TRY

So here comes your final exercise. Take your story once more, and write it out:

#1 as a story with page definitions as I've done for Chewy Lewie

#2 as a straight picture book manuscript as I've done here with Ickle Pickle.

SUMMARY

Find out what a picture book really is, and why you like them. Ask yourself: why do I like picture books? Good question, yourself will say, then: I think you should ask your three year old self. The three of you can have a good old natter about it, and pick a seed or two.

Plant one in your imagination. Go on. What if you were to do that?

When it has grown one inch, tell it the story of the Three Little Pigs to make it brave, then send it on a hunt for a giant Venus Fly-trap (climb the hill, jump off the cliff).

It will return home a little bigger, a little stronger. Re-plant into a grid-shaped box with 32 holes. See that it grows evenly across the holes, but leave the edges clear. You don't know where that Venus Fly-trap is lurking.

See what pretty shapes, colours, flowers and perfumes your story is developing. Do you really need to add to perfection? Oh ... err, yes, of course. That's okay. Well, what would you like to add? Ah, that's good. Some fertiliser; a nicely-painted blue fence to grow along, and some photos of how the petals look under a microscope. Look! There's a bug.

Paint wondrous words along the leaves. Be sure to make them count.

Twisty tendrils, flower stems too; in just the right amount.

Now your picture book plant will be almost ready for gift-wrapping. Shake it loose of the soil, lop off any overhanging foliage (preferably the dead stuff) and make sure it fits in its box.

Lovely. All that's left to do: polish the petals until they gleam, prune the thorns away, then sprinkle everything with glitter. Close box, and seal with a kiss.

Send. The end.

And I didn't mean to rhyme.

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