

WRITERS GOTTA WRITE: CHILDREN'S BOOKS

By Jill Marshall

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

A how-to guide on writing books for children aged 5 - 15

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Jill Marshall is the best-selling author of the seven-book Jane Blonde ® series for girls, with readers in more than twenty countries and ten different languages. With fiction from picture books to adult novels published by Penguin, Macmillan and Hachette over the past seven years, she has first-hand experience of an author's life.

Building on her background in HR/Training and Development, a couple of Masters' Degrees and a decade in writing coaching, Jill established her own publishing company in 2011 to support authors from first words to publication.

When not writing, teaching, coaching, editing and publishing, Jill lies on a sofa with a cold flannel over her eyes. She likes dancing, acting, singing and talking, and one day will summon up the energy to do at least one of them again (apart from talking, which she does all the time). Jill divides her time between the sofa and her desk.

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

Introduction

When I was in my mid-twenties and very happily ensconced in a career in human resources, a clairvoyant told me - completely out of the blue - that I should write books for children.

Her exact words, as I recall, were: “You should write children’s books. If you do, you’ll be successful.” This was apropos of nothing, sandwiched between some doom or gloom on the relationship front, and a bit of speculation about my current job. Where I’d end up living. All that stuff.

The truth is, all I remember of the entire session is that one sentence, coming as it did as a bolt from the skies, and reconnecting me with a childhood dream and a dream for childhood.

Now, here I am. Known, mainly, as a children’s writer.

Sometimes that’s all I’m known as, if people are not aware that I also write adult fiction and non-fiction books such as this one. Sometimes, in fact, I’m just known as the writer of the Jane Blonde series for girls.

All of that is with good cause, I should add. I have been very successful in the children’s book world, and less so in the adult fiction milieu. And of all my published children’s books (that’s a dozen or so books, and growing), the Jane Blonde series, featuring my sensational spylet, Janey Brown aka the Blonde, has been far and away the most successful. The seven book series has sold hundreds of thousands of copies, in twenty or more countries, in ten different languages. It’s featured in the Times best-seller list, been optioned for film, and nestled beside bestselling children’s book as one of the World Book Day titles.

I’m very, very happy to be known as a children’s author. When I was a kid, that’s what I wanted to be when I grew up: writing fiction for children (specifically historical fiction for children, of

which more anon). Then Psychic Lady made me take pause and reconsider that option – for all of ten seconds, at that point. A few years later, my calling grew louder; I embarked on a distance-learning course for children’s writers, still juggling my HR career as well as, by this time, solo parenting with a very young baby. A couple of years later, I stepped it up and undertook a Master of Arts in Creative Writing *for children*. Yes, specifically in writing for children.

Then came the writing. Oh, the writing. How I love it. Besides Jane Blondes times seven, I’ve written many, many other books for children. Several have been published already; some are waiting for their moment to shine.

And that moment will come. Just as you know from observing your own children that some will may struggle a little, other may be late developers and a couple may go off the rails for a while until they find their purpose in life; that, in fact, it’s the rare few that drift effortlessly through life, getting straight As and winding up on reality TV for the *right* reasons – so in the same way you know that none of your children’s books are the same. Some are now. Some are future. Some were a practice session. All are valid, worthwhile and rewarding in their own unique way.

Of the fifteen years that I’ve now focussed on creative pursuits, I’ve spent a huge proportion of time writing children’s books. As a writing coach and trainer, I’ve devoted just as much time to tutoring other authors in how to write children’s books, and have edited hundreds, if not thousands, of children’s books along the way. Now, as a publisher with my own publishing house, I offer all types of fiction for all ages from a variety of authors, but with a concentration on excellent, entertaining books for kids.

(Please do note that what I’m discussing here are *chapter books for children*, for ages five years and up to and including young adults. If you’re looking for assistance with your rhyming, illustrated book for below five, then you’ll find that in Writers Gotta Write: Picture Books).

So you’ll see, I hope, that I know my way around books for children. I’d love to help you write your own with a few short-cuts that I’ve learned along the way.

Right. Enough prevarication and back story! You'll discover later that there isn't need for much of that. Consider this a prologue. A foreshadowing of the many interesting nuggets of information and insight that follow. A little intuition, if you like, about what you're going to discover along the way, because as someone once said to me, and I now say to you:

“You should write children's books. If you do, you'll be successful.”

Happy writing!

Jillx

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Chapter 1: The writer in you

You've decided that you would like to write for children. Congratulations on an excellent choice! Writing children's books can be extremely rewarding, regardless of your motive for writing them.

It can also be frustrating, puzzling, difficult and lonely, and herein, I imagine, lies the impetus for you reading this book.

Over the coming chapters you will be guided through some of the highs and lows, the peaks and troughs of writing for children. The aim is to give you an extremely practical overview of the craft and the market, with guidelines and ideas that have worked for others and can work for you too.

These are not rules as such, but some helpful norms that can be used in writing – in all types of writing, but particularly in children's writing. Once you know what the guidelines are, you can choose for yourself whether you want to write within them or you'd prefer to break new ground. If you opt for the latter, you can be assured that you're doing so deliberately and for good reason, rather than inadvertently and in a way that will make a publisher's eyes roll to the back of their head.

As Robert McKee says in his wonderful guide to film-making, Story:

Story is about principles, not rules.

A rule says, "You *must* do it *this way*." A principle says, "This *works* ... and has through all remembered time." The difference is crucial. Your work needn't be modeled after the "well-made"... rather, it must be *well made* within the principles that shape our art.

Anxious, inexperienced writers obey rules. Rebellious, unschooled writers break rules. Artists master the form.

With each chapter, you will be taken through a different aspect of writing for children (with this one being about getting down to writing in the first place). Some chapters will appeal to you more than others. Some will make more sense than others. All of them need to be at least *considered* if you wish to produce a professional piece of work. By ‘professional’, I mean work that stands a chance of being considered once it hits a publisher’s desk, or, in these days of democracy in the publishing world, of being feted as a well-written book once you’ve positioned it on Amazon.

Of course, not everyone writes with an ultimate aim of getting published. It may be that you want to write down your childhood memoirs for your own satisfaction. You may wish to pass on messages to your children or grandchildren. Or you may wish to be the next J.K.Rowling/Robert Muchamore/Stephanie Meyer. All fine. Whichever is the case, you’ll be able to shape your work in a satisfactory way by the time you have been through every chapter. We cannot promise JK levels of sophistication or remuneration, but we can assure you that you will have a better idea of what it takes.

Why do you want to be a children’s writer?

Let’s start by taking a look at what it means to be a writer, particularly a children’s writer.

The motives for writing for children are as varied as the individuals who do it, successfully or unsuccessfully (which itself depends on what your definition of success is!). Children’s writers are not a homogeneous brand. They do not all write because they have children or grandchildren, or because they are teachers, although some do. They do not all produce picture books or teen books or fiction alone, though there is always the exception who proves the rule. They do not all make a living out of it, though there are those who can.

Every children's author has their own reason or reasons for wanting to create their own stories for children. Take a few minutes to think about why **you** want to write for children, and note the reasons down below.

NB It's a good idea to have a notebook for your writing, to jot down ideas and so on. 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 I had this great story I wanted to get down on paper. And hey, look at that - I've nearly done it!"

There may be many times when you'll need little reminders of what on earth you're doing this writing malarkey 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.

So what did you write? I ask these questions a lot on my live workshop, and these are the most common responses:

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

It's not, sorry. I write both children's and adult fiction, and enjoy them both equally but for different reasons. With my adult writing, I have much more freedom: I can follow the odd stream of consciousness; stray into areas that might seem slightly at a tangent, a little off-kilter or taboo, or even deliver monologues that are entirely my own views expounded through the cheeky use of my character as a mouthpiece.

For my children's books, while I can exercise my obscenely overactive imagination and know I can take the young reader with me in a way the adult reader would not entertain, I have to stick to the rules. In other words, no rambling off through a thicket that's going nowhere. Stick to the plot. Don't add in four pages of dialogue just because I find it hilarious even though it has no

relevance to the storyline. Don't do taboo. Don't forget who I'm writing for altogether, and climb on my soap box ...

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. Picture books, for instance, are usually a maximum of 32 pages, and you may have only a few words per page. You probably write longer shopping lists.

Having said all that, if you think it will be easier to write for children because it's what naturally occurs to you, and therefore it flows out of you without you needing to pause for thought ... then yes. Then, it's easier.

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

Well, children are honest – brutally so, on occasions. But are they going to tell you they hate your book with their guardian clutching the back of their shirt in a tight, uncomfortable knot and threatening them with spinach if they don't say nice things to you?

It's my personal view that unless your children's book is a picture book and specifically intended for reading aloud, you should give your book to a test audience in print, and get them to read it themselves. While you're staging a major production of your masterpiece, it's easy to add in all sorts of nuance and interest which they might not glean for themselves as a reader. Get it bound up into a book format and leave it in the school library for a term, or format into a PDF (or an e-book) and send it around to a few impartial readers in the target audience. That way you'll get genuine feedback about the readability of the text, rather than a round of ecstatic applause for being a celebrity parent for an hour or two.

Obviously there are exceptions to this. Winnie the Pooh would never have been born if his creator had not made him up for his son's delectation; the same could be said of Alice in Wonderland and many others. It may well be that your story is truly wonderful, but do remember that your own family is not terribly objective (unless they too are writers).

The prolific and wonderful children's author, Anne Fine, warned: "Never ever give your writing to your spouse to read. They can never get it right. It's not simply that they'll be incorrect in whatever they say, rather that you won't believe it anyway, for good or ill."

Anyone can write a children's book!

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 everyone will tell you, "Oh! I've got a great idea for a children's book."

They then proceed to tell you about it at great length, with nary a thought for the one you're creating. Next, they'll list all the rubbish their children are reading, and how their book is going to be so much better. And well-written. Isn't it awful how badly written kids' books are these days, they'll moan. Rounding off with a list of the classics they read as children which were worthy of their attention, they'll then tell you that nothing decent has been written since *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Secret Garden*, *Huckleberry Finn*, or whatever they read as a kid, and leave you with a distinct impression that you might as well not bother.

Unfortunately, then, many people do believe that anyone can write a children's book. The language is easy, the plots are simplistic, the characters clichéd. And they're short. What could be difficult about that? 'They' could knock something like that in an hour or two.

I've witnessed the most hideous dismissal of children's writers and their books by many an individual or organisation. Probably the worst offenders, sadly, are writers of adult fiction. I've even heard of one author (a poet, I think) who was on a writer's residency alongside another

author, who was also on a residency, telling the children's writer that they wanted them to stick to one end of the building because they had to concentrate in the quiet, because they were writing - wait for it - a 'proper' book. Yes. I hope their proper book has done well for them. I really do ...

The suggestion always seems to be that writing a children's book is as easy and effortless as having the initial idea, and that there is no skill, talent or application involved. It is not that easy. 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.

Incidentally, something else that you will have to get used to when you tell people you write children's books is their assumption that you write picture books for 0 - 4 year olds. I have yet to work out why so many people assume this when 'children' go right up to about age thirteen or fourteen, and you don't see many of them reading *Horrid Henry* or *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. This is why I've developed the habit of saying 'I write children's novels'.

"I want to be as rich as that Harry Potter woman."

J.K. Rowling did a wonderful thing for children's books. She enticed a whole, world-wide generation of children back to the written word. She allowed for large advances and book deals for children's writers. She created characters and settings that are so rich and evocative that they are entirely believable. Perhaps she has opened up a space for there to be 'the next Harry Potter' and therefore the 'next J.K. Rowling' ... Stephanie Meyer ... Hunger Games author ... Michael Morpurgo ...

However, the likelihood is that most of us will still struggle to make a living as a writer, and may never spawn a character which entails the production of millions of dressing-up costumes and Bertie Bott's Beans. If you'd like to hear more of the money you would probably make from children's books, check out my why-to guide on writing and publishing in the 21st century, the original *Writers Gotta Write*.

So. There we are. These are some of the common and, perhaps, less viable reasons for wanting to write children's 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 fantasy, and I don't yet have the confidence to do it. Once I've done my course, I'll be happy to give it a go, for adults or children.'

'I read it to my children or grandchildren or niece or 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. As I mentioned earlier, if your responses to any of those comments above were along the lines of: 'I just love it and the stories pour out of me without me even asking', then every single one of those reasons could work out of you. Again, you'll find much more about this whole topic in WRITERS GOTTA WRITE.

Here are some of my own motives, by way of example:

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

I'm happiest when I'm being creative.

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.

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

I have wild, crazy ideas that only a child could fully appreciate.

'Wild' and 'crazy' ideas and behaviours are often associated with creative people. Painters who cut off their own ears, writers who shut themselves away and live on cornflakes for two months, musicians who re-live their pain to express it through their guitar and gravelly voice – all these might be considered the actions of the slightly batty.

Most of us, though, manage to live normal lives, hold down jobs, raise families and produce creative work without untold difficulty. And it's very important to try to fit your writing into your normal life so that it becomes as natural as sleeping, as automatic as brushing your teeth.

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.

Being a writer

Okay, this is all leading somewhere, I promise you. We're trying to discover what type of writer we are, and head towards a personal goal that will encourage us along the way. That's because,

as mentioned before, if we are unable to translate our wild ideas into the written word, then we are not writers, we are just creative thinkers. It all starts with creative thinking, but then more often than not, it is the *craft* of writing which causes us confusion and frustration.

If we can understand ourselves as writers, we can prepare ourselves for some of the challenges ahead and work out ways to get around them. And setting goals is a very good way to make ourselves write when we don't want to - I know, it's hard to believe right now but honestly, there will be moments when you think: 'The last thing I want to do is add even ten more words to that boring, hideous book I'm supposed to be writing'.

You won't be on your own. Here are some quotes from eminent writers:

"We are all creative. Every day we slaughter our finest impulses. That is why we get a heart-ache when we read those lines written by the hand of a master and recognise them as our own, as the tender shoots which we stifled because we lacked the faith to believe in our own powers, our own criterion of truth and beauty. " (Henry Miller)

"Like any other art, creative writing is a function of the whole person. The unconscious must flow freely and richly, bringing at demand all the treasures of memory, all the emotions, incidents, scenes, intimations of character and relationship which it has stored away in its depths. The unconscious is shy, elusive and unwieldy, but it is possible to tap it at will, and even direct it." (Dorothea Brande)

"Lower your standards and keep going." (William Stafford)

"It is essential to remember that the creative end is never in full sight at the beginning and that it is brought wholly into view only when the process of completion is completed." (Brewster Gheislin)

"When talented people write well, it is generally for this reason: they're moved by a desire to touch the audience." (Robert McKee)

"I write one page of masterpiece to ninety-one pages of sh#! (Ernest Hemingway)

You are a creative person, so you will empathise with some or perhaps all of these statements. My own favourite is the William Stafford quote. It's incredibly easy to fall in love with a character, a scene, sometimes a particular sentence that you've written, and spend so much time honing that set of words that you look up at the end of your allotted amount of time and find you've done virtually nothing. Furthermore, you haven't even considered whether the character fits into the plot, or the first chapter is anything like the rest of the book.

At times like these, taking William Stafford's advice can release the writer from the strait-jacket of perfectionism and allow them to carry on doing what they're meant to be doing. So many writers have stated that their best advice is to get your behind on the seat and make it stay there that it's impossible to name them all; it's very true.

Have a second look at the quote you chose as your favourite. What does it say to you about your own creative process? You can jot it down in your tactile notebook, if you like. I'm going to hum for a while and look out of the window while you do it, so no pressure at all. Take your time. It's worth it.

(Some time later)

Interesting, huh? Did you discover something new about yourself as a writer?

For instance, you might have told yourself: 'Oh, I know I'm a perfectionist, but I thought that was a good thing! Now I see that it can keep me stuck. I'll have to come up with some tools to deal with that if I start to feel it happening.'

Maybe it was this: 'I have hundreds of ideas, and I'm very creative. How will I cope with them all? Maybe if I note them down, then the ones that are good will blossom so I can get on with them even if I don't know the end.'

Or ... (and this is me, by the way) ... 'If I can't get the whole book out in three weeks then I know I'm going to lose interest and then possibly never finish it, so I have to know that I have three weeks with the book as my main priority, and make sure I finish it in those three weeks, no excuses. I can't spend time assuming that 99% of what I write will be ... you know, what Ernest Hemingway said. It's got to be good from the outset, which means I have to plan it!'

So this is taking us from why we want to write children's books, to what it takes to actually be a writer of children's books. It's important to dovetail your creative process and your everyday life as neatly as possible if you are to get your behind in place often enough to make a difference.

By that, I mean that if you know you can't think straight until you've got the kids off to nursery and a fourth cappuccino inside you, then don't plan your writing time for early in the morning.

Conversely, if you need absolute quiet in which to write, 5am might be the perfect time for you to get a couple of hours in. If your modus operandi is to edit every word before you start writing anew, then allow time for that, or train yourself to look only at the last paragraph to re-find your voice before you keep on keeping on.

Permission to be a writer

It's often hard to prioritise our writing time when we have so many other obligations in our lives, so many roles to play. Our role lists are often huge, ranging from parent, care-giver, sounding-board for friends, animal-feeder, multi-national chief executive as well as all of the above. The word 'writer' might not even appear on your list.

Often we find it very difficult to tell people that we are writers, as it seems to be less important than our myriad other duties. Everyone has a permission point at which they will accept that they might call themselves a 'writer'. For some people it is a recognition that it's their deepest desire; for others it is because that's what they spend most of their time doing. For many, the permission point comes when they have something published.

Arizona authors Brian Hill and Dee Power devised some entertaining statistics about the 195,000 books issued in the United States in 2009, including the fact that 25 million people in America consider themselves “writers”, but only 5% have been published anywhere.

Most of us, however, are very hard on ourselves. I have known people on courses who will not call themselves an author because they’ve not yet had a children’s book published, yet they make their living from journalism.

When I was studying for my master’s degree in Writing for Children, I would tell people that I was a student and a mum, despite the fact that I spent at least 40 hours a week writing children’s stories. At a party, a stranger cut me short. ‘Don’t apologise for it,’ he told me. ‘If you spend all that time writing, the same time that most people are out at work, then that’s what you do. You’re a writer.’

Now, if it’s difficult for us to call ourselves ‘writers’, then imagine how hard it is for our nearest and dearest to call us the same, and take us seriously in our requests. Somehow, the words “Not this morning, I’m writing,” translate in their ears into “Today I’m stretched out on the sofa watching Oprah and am at your whim if you decide to call for a two hour discussion about your marital problems.” Visitors stride into your home and wait expectantly by the kettle while you are mid-sentence on the computer. You are seen as a ready source of last-minute child-minding.

And somehow, every time, we capitulate.

Writers must be strong! Switch off the phone. Hire an office. Close the curtains. Tell someone, nicely, they can’t come in because you’re writing. They soon start to understand.

We need to give ourselves permission to be a writer. That may mean you allow yourself one hour a week to sit in a café with your wonderful notebook, or it could entail forty hours at a computer. It has to work for you, and you only.

How are you going to make it work? It might be as simple as deciding not to go to lunch with your workmates on Wednesdays but sit on a park bench and scribble ideas, or asking your mum to take the kids on Saturday afternoons. Alternatively, it might be as radical as working out how you can leave your career behind and embark on an entirely new one (as I did). The choice is personal and circumstantial. It may change over time, but for now – for RIGHT NOW – it's important to get your head around it. That way you'll commit. That way you'll get support. That way, you allow yourself to write your children's book.

Then it will all be worthwhile, I promise you.

In the next chapter, we'll really get started.

SOMETHING TO TRY

First of all, pick your favourite of the author statements in Chapter 1, and note down how it applies to you. What has that told you about your creative process?

After that, write down a list of all the roles you have in your life. Don't force yourself to put 'writer' in there; just let it flow and see if the word pops up on your list. What does this tell you about where writing fits into your life?

Next, think about how you are going to give yourself permission to call yourself a writer. Remember, this is the thing that imbues you with the strength to say, 'No, can't come for coffee. I'm writing.' What does this tell you about your commitment to writing your children's book?

Then fill in the blanks in the following statement:

I really want to write my children's book. As a creative person, I need (blank). As a person with a life, in order to negotiate writing time with the other roles in my life, I'm going to need (blank). And to call myself a writer, I'm going to need (blank).

Then set yourself a goal to enable that to happen.

You might have said, for instance:

I really want to write my children's book. As a creative person, I need to write in one long blast. As a person with a life, in order to negotiate writing time with the other roles in my life, I'm going to need a long holiday from the family. And to call myself a writer, I'll come back with my book written and ready to go.

That's great. Really great. However, a long holiday away from the family may not be practical. But how about a short holiday? A weekend to get you started? Note down a goal or two that will

enable you to devote the time and energy you require to writing for children, remembering to make your goal SMART.

Specific

Measureable

Achievable

Realistic

Timed

Test out your goal. Is it specific? eg 'I will ask Chris to walk the dog on Friday mornings', not 'I will avoid dog-walking whenever possible'.

Realistic? 'I'll have cleaners in once a fortnight' rather than 'I will leave all house-cleaning to the children'.

Timed? 'In one month I will have written 2000 words of my great idea', instead of 'I'll write my book most evenings instead of watching CSI.'

It might even be about reading rather than writing, but make it 'I will read one book on the recommended reading list by the time of the next chapter' rather than 'I'll read the whole of Harry Potter, Twilight and Zac Powers and find out what all the fuss is about.'

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 that children’s book.”

You’ve just given yourself permission. Well done. You’re a writer now!

Summary

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.

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

We have to work at ways to take our writing seriously ourselves, to get from others the help that we need. We all have a 'permission point'; it helps to identify it, then work towards it.

There are small, practical steps that we can take to devote our creative energies to writing, and knowing our goal assists us in that.

Chapter 2 Getting started

What's stopping you starting?

Knowing where to start, and then making yourself do it, is often the very hardest part of the writing process. I have just struggled with it myself, wondering how to begin this chapter. Often we're just afraid to begin. After all, if you start something, you might be expected to finish it, too!

Committing your words to paper is not just an empty phrase, because 'committing' is exactly what you are doing. You are making yourself a promise that the story which has eaten away at your solar plexus for months, perhaps years, is going to be written down so that someone else can share it. You are opening your story up to that most frightening of creatures – a reader. Sometimes, it seems far easier not to begin at all.

Be aware that you are far from being alone if this is what you experience. Everyone has their demons, who leap up and down, poking their tridents at you and forcing you back out of that chair. Walk into my house in the week I'm meant to be starting a new book, and you will find it the cleanest it has been since ... well, since the last time I was meant to be starting a new book. I don't just clean - I spring-clean: I bundle old and not-so-old items up for the charity shop, vacuum under beds, find bits of woodwork to paint. And I hate cleaning!

Either that, or I find endless reasons to meet up with people for coffee. They all seem like very valid foundations for leaving my piece of work until next week. Or maybe next month.

It's rather odd that we avoid starting something that is going to bring us, and hopefully many other people, a great deal of pleasure. Writing is a joy. You find yourself in a creative space where you are unaware of the world around you. You are energized, charged up, and sometimes imbued with a strong sensation that you are channeling some greater power as part of a deeply

spiritual experience. In order to get to that stage of fulfillment, however, you have to break through the starting process.

If you don't find it difficult to get started, count your blessings!

Procrastination at this stage is extremely common. It's not that you're lazy, or not really that interested in writing. In writing, procrastination most often stems from a fear - the fear of being judged.

So you let yourself off the hook by pre-judging yourself with statements like: "There's no point in me starting, it's going to be rubbish," or "I'm far too busy to start a book; look at all the roles I have in my life, and I'm not even doing most of those properly," and "The last time I showed my work to someone was at school, and that felt terrible - why would I put myself through that again?"

So let's just say it. There is a tiny first step you need to take, and that's to ... well, to get over yourself a wee bit. Nobody's looking, just sit down and do it.

Believe me, you'll judge yourself far more harshly in the end if you don't make yourself put pen to paper, finger to keyboard, and make a start. Then you'll be kicking yourself, wondering why someone else is succeeding when you haven't (answer: they wrote something), why you're still feeling unfulfilled (answer: you're still not doing this wonderful creative thing that you promised yourself you would do).

So what if you write something and then you hate it? It can be your own little secret, though one that will not be a surprise to any other writer in the universe (think of what Hemingway said!). Write something else instead, and you might just love it.

However, if that's not quite enough to get you going, then here are some practical suggestions that you might try to get you started. #

You'll recall in chapter 1 that we talked about your permission point, for calling yourself a writer. Here we will look into some every-day permissions – some small things you can do to allow yourself to feel free to write whenever you have planned to (according to your goals in chapter 1).

Zap your demons

As mentioned, when I'm in writing avoidance, I clean. It is about the only time that I do it willingly. After jumping up from the computer to grab the dish-cloth for the tenth time in a morning, however, I realized something.

I only clean because I have to feel that everything is in order before I can grant myself an every-day permission to write. I cannot write if the beds aren't made, the dishwasher isn't loaded, and there are piles of unopened mail on my desk. If my environment is cluttered, then my mind feels cluttered too.

It took me a couple of years to work this out, and I wish I'd known that about myself when I was a student many years ago!

You see, I have a Cleaning Demon. Or, more precisely, a Clutter Demon. Clutter can range from toys and DVDs on the floor, to unopened e-mails. Whatever the case, I have to zap my demon before I am happy to write.

My routine has changed completely to accommodate this. I defined the times that I am free to write, as you did in chapter 1, and then I worked out the rest of my life to enable that time to be fully utilized as writing time. My routine used to be practically non-existent, other than I would get myself up and my daughter to school before considering what to do with the day. I would therefore waste hours and sometimes whole days catching up with all the tidying, before remembering with a shock that I had to be back at the school gate.

Nowadays I still come to with a jolt when it's close to school home-time, but that is because I am engrossed in my writing - sometimes so engrossed that I forget to eat. If I have a writing project in mind, I get up a little earlier, tidy everything away, deal with my emails, and *then* sort my daughter out and walk the dog (another demon of mine – the Sorrowful Canine Demon). If there's enough spare cash I get cleaners in to do a thorough clean once a week too.

At 9.30am, I'm ready to sit down and start writing, in the knowledge that the demonic twins of Dog and Dirt will not be able to goad me into writing avoidance. That allows me a few straight hours of uninterrupted writing time, so I can switch off without guilt when I turn back into a parent and dog-walker.

Your own demons may be completely different (although I've found a lot of us share this kind of demon, based on the guilty feeling that we should be doing something 'proper!'). Think of your demons, and consider how to zap them.

Gag the nag

The nag is your internal critic, not to be confused with a demon, for all he or she may have many similar characteristics. They both fill your head with insidious black little thoughts that block your creativity. Both will jostle for position with all the other thoughts in your head, trying to gain supremacy. The most obvious and important similarity between the demon and the nag is that both will stop you writing.

The unhelpful nag may sound like a parent, either critical or concerned. "You'll never amount to anything; what are you wasting your time for?" That's not a nice one, and you may need a therapy to work that one out! The concerned voice will be more subtle: "I'm just worried about how you're going to survive. How will you take the rejection? You were never good at rejection, honey!" This voice is just trying to protect you, but in doing so they're preventing you from moving forward.

I wasn't joking about the therapy, by the way. If you hear these voices consistently, and especially if you talk back to them, seek professional help! However, if you're just aware that the voice is there, in an undercurrent, you could first of all identify it, which might help you say, 'Aha! That's who that is! Well, that daft old bat, Great Aunt Malicious, was never right about anything, so I'm safe to ignore that.' If that doesn't sort it out, you could try to clear it with something like EFT (Emotional Freedom Technique). It might sound kooky, but Google it and see if any of that might work for you. It's free, and it may be helpful.

One thing to remember, though, is that unlike your demons, there *will* be times when your internal critic will be useful. When you are editing, you will find Inner Critic invaluable. When you are half-way through your piece and a little nagging voice is telling you that you have headed off tangentially in completely the wrong direction, it may be worth listening then too. Right now, though, you are just about to start, and that is not the time let the nagging voice disarm you.

Some practical things you might do that will enable you to gag the nag:

Switch off the spelling and grammar check on your computer. You may need help in this area, in which case you can switch it on again when you're done. If you don't need help in this area, there's no point in having it on anyway. In either case, there is nothing more guaranteed to stop you in your tracks than a squiggly red or green line appearing under your writing as the words appear on the screen. 'Well, what's wrong with that?' you think. Then what's even worse is that an annoying little figure pops up with a speech box and tells you exactly what's wrong with that. Usually it's a 'fragmented sentence' which you should 'consider rewording'. No, you shouldn't. Feel free to shout at the annoying little figure as you switch him off: 'I'm writing a book! Fragmented sentences are allowed!'

Promise yourself you will write solidly for two paragraphs, or a page, or a chapter - whatever you can sensibly manage - without once checking over what you've written. Your internal editor will make you question every word if you check every sentence, whereas if you go back at the end of a good stretch of writing you'll question fewer of the details and look at it more as a

whole. This means you'll achieve more, feel good about it, and eventually realise that you can turn off your editor almost completely until you're good and ready to turn them back on again.

Find yourself some music to listen to while you're writing. You won't exactly *listen* - you'll just let it fade into the background while your lovely book pours out onto the page. But meanwhile the part of your brain that needs noise will have something to focus on, and there's less chance of that nagging voice shouting 'Me, me! Listen to me!' Particularly if you find some music it loves and send it to sleep.

Be the teacher

Another way to make yourself get your book underway is to pretend that you're your own teacher. This is a strict teacher. Teacher wants your homework in on time. Teacher expects you to have written two full pages by the end of your lunch-hour. Teacher doesn't care what else you've got to do: TEACHER HAS SPOKEN!

Okay, you don't need to frighten yourself with memories of your most horrible teacher ever, but what you do need to do is set yourself a deadline. Then stick to it. Make the deadline practical (SMART, in fact) and then find a way to make yourself commit to it and follow it through.

If you were with me 'live' in a workshop situation instead of working your way through this book, I would be doing this for you in person. It's called 'We're going to do an exercise'. I'd set the exercise, which might sneakily involve you starting your book, and tell you how long you've got to do it. At the end of that allotted time, I would stop you.

Even if you hadn't wanted to write a word, just the feeling that I would be expecting something from you would spur you on (not to mention the pressure of everyone else in the room apparently beavering away without a moment's hesitation). So what you're doing, effectively, is turning yourself into me. You are your own Jill Marshall Avatar.

The other part of being a teacher, of course, is giving feedback and coaching. So while you're being your own teacher, complete your piece of writing to deadline and *then* allow yourself some time to read it, mark it, and think what you might say to yourself as your teacher. That way you can write, edit, and improve in blocks as you go along, and you're actually moving your book forward in leaps and bounds.

Incentivise

This is straight-forward one. Just promise yourself a reward for when you've made a really good start. As long as it's not a month off writing or tracking down Jill Marshall and shooting her for making you do this, you can have complete free range as to how to motivate yourself to get to a finish point.

SOMETHING TO TRY

Write a paragraph or two about your demons, nags, teachers and incentives. Just let yourself enjoy thinking about what each of them represents. What memories do they stir up? Who do they remind you of? How do they make you feel now as an adult?

Then consider for each: what are you going to do about it?

Oh, and by the way, you've started writing. Awesome.

SUMMARY

We often put off starting our books for ridiculous amounts of time, and for reasons we can't explain to ourselves.

Often this comes down to fear of being judged (if your book is released it will invite criticism), fear of failure (what if I don't finish it? Or I do and it's not good enough?), or fear of letting people down (people are paying for me to do this, either in time or money).

Demons are the things we do to avoid writing. They need to be zapped to enable us to start writing and then continue once we've begun. We need to zap them each time we sit down to write until it becomes second nature.

Nags are voices, often from our past, that criticise us or express concern about our abilities. It's useful to identify them to begin with, and to attempt to clear them away. There are computer 'nags' which we can turn off.

Teachers are supportive, constructively critical and give us deadlines. We can help ourselves after we've written by turning on our teacher mode. While we're writing, they can be a 'nag' and should be gagged.

Incentivising ourselves can assist us in getting started.

Chapter 3 In the beginning

CREATING IDEAS

Funnily enough, what we've actually been doing with the last chapter might be classed as yet more procrastination. Even though you might have scribbled down a few childhood memories, you still haven't started writing your story.

Sorry about that. I just thought it was important to discuss. So now you're ready, and ... off you go!

Oh, all right, you can leave it a moment. It's not just as straightforward as getting your office sorted and setting yourself a deadline. You have to have something to write *about*.

Now, you may already have your idea in mind. That might be why you got hold of 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.

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 of a lot 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/hearing/smelling/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 Jane Blonde, the process started with me calling my daughter ‘Blonde girl’ and ‘Blondie’ when she was about two years old (a long time ago now!). I connected the name ‘Blonde’ with a certain special agent, and started to think, ‘What if there was a girl called Blonde. She’d have to have a first name that sounded like James. Jane. Yeah. So what if there was a girl called Jane Blonde? She’d just have to be a spy.’

And so Jane Blonde was born. That was in 1998. That character sat around in my head for three or four years until I was well into my Masters’ Degree in Writing for Children, because while I could see that she had enormous potential as a character, I didn’t actually have that other critical element of a good story - a plot.

Then one day, I was watching a programme on TV about extreme animals who can live in extraordinarily harsh or challenging environments. On his outstretched palm, the presenter was holding out a glassy object, and he was explaining that it was actually a frog - a North American Wood Frog, in fact. To survive in the frozen Canadian snowscape, the frog stops all its bodily processes including breathing and circulating blood, and effectively freezes itself. If someone dug it out of the ground and threw it into the fireplace like a vodka glass, it would smash into a thousand shards. But if they warmed it gently in front of the fire instead, replicating a spring thaw, the frog would start to pump its blood around again, breathe again ... come back to life again.

Amazing, I thought, and I recognised this funny quiver in my body which usually means I’ve hit on a good idea.

‘What if,’ I asked myself, ‘instead of being a freezing frog, there was some way to find a way for people to do that? What if a person could freeze solid for a time and then come back to life?’

Then I remembered cryogenics, which is the science investigating just this very ability. That had already been done. I had to be wilder in my imaginings. ‘Okay, okay,’ I said. ‘So what if once they’re frozen, the person can be shaped into something else - a creature, or ice cubes, or icicles or what if ...’

The possibilities were endless.

‘And then what if while they were frozen, they could listen in on conversations and so on, then they’d have their cells marked so they could be put back together again ... and what if ... what if that person was a spy! How useful that would be for spying!’

And there it was. My plot. My story to go with the girl spy I’d created some four years before. I wrote the first Jane Blonde quickly, and then what if I’d my way through a series of seven books, while having many other ‘what if’ moments throughout that have formed other books.

The other amazing thing about this process is that one ‘what if’ can spawn many different ideas. Someone else might have looked at that frog and thought, ‘What if it came to life now and swallowed the presenter?’ Or, ‘What if the presenter tried to demonstrate the smashing thing, dropped the frog, and it bounced? What if it’s actually the bounciest frog ever? And what if it’s discovered by NASA, and what if it can be used for investigating what’s happening on Mars just by bouncing?’

Well, perhaps they might not have had those very thoughts. Those are my other thoughts. 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 book, or a chapter, or what to do with a tricky bit of something I’m writing. It makes me very nosy, so I might lean in a bit too close to some stranger’s conversation, and sometimes I go into a trance while I’m what ifting 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 Jane Blonde frog idea and the bouncing space investigator idea, I didn't just stop at one 'what if'. I keep on what ifing, extrapolating the silly scenario 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.

You can also do with newspaper headlines and articles, things you overhear, something your kids bring home from school, a billboard or noticeboard. It becomes a habit – or, some might say, a curse – so that at several points throughout the day you'll notice something. Then you'll notice it in a new way. Then you'll cock your head, your eyes will slide to one side, and you'll begin to dream. Eventually you'll offend either the person you're with who finally works out you're not listening to a word they're saying, or the person you're now gawping at as if you've never seen anyone with such an unusual face in your entire *life*, and you'll be jolted back to reality ...

Hopefully by this time, however, you'll have generated 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 staring at the clouds.

Once you've accumulated a stock of ideas, you'll start to recognise that some of them are better than others, or are more sustainable, or will just allow you to complete a story without hitting a brick wall in the middle. You'll note from my own frog example that the 'swallows presenter' story wasn't really going anywhere, and I didn't know how that would end. The bouncing frog had more traction, and could have gone somewhere (and still might one day!), but the spy story sprang forth in more or less complete form.

This is what often happens: the ideas with legs will just pour out and feel whole in some way. You might remember that funny 'quiver' I feel when I know a story's good - well, that's something else to begin to recognise.

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. Sometimes I find I can't stop smiling while I'm reading. You'll find a way to trust your instincts, and discover which ideas warrant further investigation and which should be shelved (though you might bring them back out again one day).

Okay. Now for the story itself. Either in your notebook or exercise paper or on your computer, grab one of those ideas and start your story. On your marks, get set ... GO!

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

And now that you've done your writing exercise, we're going to be Nice Teacher instead of Strict Teacher, and review, comment and improve. Hopefully it was quite easy to get started once you'd settled yourself down to the task. Good.

What I wanted for you to do was connect with the story and a character or two, at least a little, and give vent to the ideas that were starting to form in your imagination.

Now, though, we're going to look at where your story itself should start ... and it's not always at the beginning that you devised.

If you bear in mind that the most frequent advice to authors from their editors is to 'lose the first chapter', you might get some inkling of what I mean. It's very common when you begin writing to start your story with some description of the setting, perhaps a list of characteristics of your hero or heroine, and some back-story of what's been going on with your characters to bring them to this point.

This is the beginning of 'Black Beauty'.

The first place that I can remember was a large pleasant meadow with a pond of clear water in it. Some shady trees leaned over it, and rushes and water-lilies grew at the deep end. Over the hedge on one side we looked into a ploughed field, and on the other we looked over a gate at our master's house, which stood by the roadside; at the top of the meadow was a plantation of fir trees, and at the bottom a running brook overhung by a steep bank.

While I was young I lived upon my mother's milk, as I could not eat grass. In the day time I ran by her side, and at night I lay down close by her. When it was hot, we used to stand by the pond in the shade of the trees ...

And so it goes on for several paragraphs if not pages.

Now contrast that with the beginning of 'How to Train Your Dragon' by Cressida Cowell (now a major motion movie!):

Long ago, on the wild and windy isle of Berk, a smallish Viking with a longish name stood up to his ankles in snow.

Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, the Hope and Heir to the Tribe of the Hairy Hooligans, had been feeling slightly sick ever since he woke up that morning.

Ten boys, including Hiccup, were hoping to become full members of the Tribe by passing the Dragon Initiation Programme. They were standing on a bleak little beach at the bleakest spot on the whole bleak island. A heavy snow was falling.

'PAY ATTENTION!' screamed Gobber the Belch, the soldier in charge of teaching Initiation ...

What differences do you see? They both describe a setting - a field and the isle of Berk respectively. They both explain something about the main character. They both use evocative language that is right for their readers (if you consider that Black Beauty was published in 1877). Obviously there are differences in tone and so on, and there is dialogue in the Hiccup tale while

there isn't in *Black Beauty*, but the main difference to my mind is that in 'How to Train Your Dragon', *something is happening*. We have been brought straight into an event, an exciting and scary initiation ceremony that introduces us quickly and cleverly to the nervous (and wonderfully-named) Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third.

That, then, is the key to the beginning of your children's book. Open with a piece of action that hooks the reader in right from the outset. This is particularly critical in children's books as children are the most exacting of readers - if you haven't grabbed them by the end of the first page, that book is going back down on the pile. They're far less forgiving than adult readers who might let you ramble on for a chapter before deciding to give up on you. And so it's our job as authors to create atmosphere and setting and character without spelling it out, and by having the reader leap straight into the story with you.

Do note that the action doesn't have to be the main catalyst for the rest of the book. These beginnings all establish character, setting, atmosphere with some action that is not the principal catalyst (or the 'bomb' as it's sometimes known):

Bumface, by Morris Gleitzman

'Angus Solomon,' sighed Ms Lowry. 'Is that a penis you've drawn in your exercise book?'

Angus jumped, startled, and remembered where he was.

Ms Lowry was standing next to his desk, staring down at the page. Other kids were sniggering.

Angus felt his mouth go dry and his heart speed up. For a second, he thought about lying. He decided not to.

'No, Miss,' he admitted, 'it's a submarine.'

Ms Lowry nodded grimly. 'I thought as much,' she said. 'Now stop wasting time and draw a penis like I asked you to.' She pointed to the one she'd drawn on the blackboard.

Jack BC and the Curse of Anubis, by Jill Marshall

Egypt 1922

The preparation was just as it should be. Painstaking. Immaculate. It had to be, to have any chance of fending off what had been unleashed. The young man patted his pocket, just to assure himself that the letters were there. Then, with a deep breath, he picked up his instruments and set about the body.

First the brain, chopped up inside the head and, with a long hook, withdrawn in pieces through the nostril. The wobbling grey mass was discarded into a bucket, like the guts of a fish. There would be no need for it now ...

These are both beginnings that evoke a particular atmosphere while being *active* - something's actually happening - but neither of these pieces of action are the main catalysts for the book. Those arrive in a few more pages.

However, it is possible to jump straight in with the catalyst if you want to. Consider these examples:

Judy Moody Saves the World, by Megan McDonald

Judy Moody did not set out to save the world. She set out to win a contest. A Band-Aid contest.

Judy snapped open her doctor kit. Where was that box of Crazy Strips? She lifted out the tiny hammer for testing reflexes.

So in this beginning, we see the overall picture right from the outset, and know that Judy is going to save the world whether she likes it or not, all because she's set out to win the Band-Aid contest. Which is right where we, the reader, come in.

And how about this for 'straight in at the catalyst'?

Bill's New Frock, by Anne Fine

When Bill Simpson woke up on Monday morning, he found he was a girl.

He was still standing staring at himself in the mirror, quite baffled, when his mother swept in.

'Why don't you wear this pretty pink dress?' she said.

'I never wear dresses,' Bill burst out.

'I know,' his mother said. 'It's such a pity.'

So you see, all we need to discover what's going on with Bill is that first line. There's no explanation. No background. No setting or character description. None of it is necessary - we know that Bill is in his bedroom, and when he went to bed on Sunday night, he was your average boy. And suddenly, on Monday morning (just in time for school) he's woken up as a girl. Straight in at a piece of action, and in this case the piece of action is the catalyst for the whole of the rest of the book - in which, incidentally, it is never explained why he turned into a girl overnight!

Right, so now it's time to look back at the beginning of the story you just wrote. You can be Nice Teacher for a moment.

Do you spend time describing all sorts of background information? If so, you could follow that editorial advice and lose the equivalent of your first chapter, which might be a few lines in this case.

Do you jump into a piece of action? If not, you might think now about how your 'what if' could lead to a little incident or event which drops the reader right into the story. It doesn't have to be THE incident that sparks off the rest of the book, but it does have to be interesting, atmospheric, and introduce your reader immediately to your character and their setting.

So now we're at the end of chapter 3. 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.

Next, we're going to move on from these opening pages of your book to go through the middle of it and find a way to get to the end. Can you imagine? What does you nag have to say about *that*? Just at the beginning, already thinking of the end. It works, though, I promise you.

SOMETHING TO TRY

What if

Do a what-if exercise based on any of the following:

One boy to another. ‘Smell my socks.’ But he’s not wearing any ...

On a church noticeboard: ‘SALE OF PEWS - ALL REASONABLE OFFERS ACCEPTED.’

Newspaper headline: NO ALLOWANCES FOR KEY.

Nice teacher

Go over the beginning of your story, either the one you wrote during the chapter, or something from the above list.

How snappy is it? Does it jump into a piece of action? How could you improve it?

Try rewriting your beginning now.

Then read both versions aloud, and see how they grab you. Hopefully you’ll get at least a glimmer of that physical reaction which proves to us that we’re on the right track.

SUMMARY

Getting started is often pretty difficult. Work out what issues might be holding you back, and give yourself some tools for tackling them.

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.

Beginnings of contemporary books are snappy, inviting, and grab the reader right from the outset. If you jump in with a piece of action, you’ll be able to expose the setting, atmosphere and character without having to write it out for the reader.

‘Action’ at the beginning of the book does not have to be the main catalytic piece of action that informs the whole of the rest of the story, although at times it may be exactly that!

Reading aloud can be a very useful ‘nice teacher’ tool to help you identify holes, dips and disappointments (or the opposite) in your writing.

Chapter 4 Not Losing the Plot

So now you've started your new book, and sorted out your beginning so that it drags the reader into the story right from the outset. Your opening glimmers with unsolved mystery while giving your fans a taste of character and setting and the many treasures to come. Even as the writer, you're excited to discover the rest of this wondrous tale. What's going to happen? Where will it go? How will this intriguing question set out in the first few paragraphs ever get answered?

It's quite an amazing aspect of creative writing that, at this stage, we're often as much in the dark as the reader. Who knows where it's going? Am I supposed to?

Really, it's up to you. You'll have a certain style, a particular way of writing that influences whether it unfolds for you in the same way as it would for the reader, or whether you're three steps ahead of them, or 32 chapters in front. If you refer back to chapter 1 and what kind of writer you are setting out to become (and why) then you might get a few clues as to which category you fall into.

It's an exciting point, to be sitting on the crest of your story with the landscape about to unroll before you.

It can also, however, be incredibly daunting. There may be dense fog obscuring your path. There may be patchy sunlight which you know you ought to be heading for but which appears to be reachable only by traversing some bogs and gorse thickets. Writers will often tell me that this is the stage at which they get stuck, put off by the enormity of what lies ahead.

Younger writers, particularly, seem to expend all their energy in getting the first few pages written, and then run out of steam so that they never embark on the rest of the journey. This is often where you'll find a rushed ending such as 'and then they woke up and it had all been a dream' or - particularly among the nine and ten-year-old boy contingent - 'then the world blew up and EVERYBODY DIED!' It's quite an obsession for this age group, but I do believe that

many adult writers would like to be able to have everybody just die. Then there would be no need to map out the rest of the story; no need to consider how a character is going to develop; no need to do anything more, really, but wrap that story up, put it away, and find a new idea to work on.

Alternatively, you might decide that this *has* to go somewhere - it's too good for it to be put away! - and so you'll diligently sit down and make yourself write. That's good. That's better. That's definitely the thing to do.

What that can often lead to, however, is a middle that sags and loses pace and interest (which we know in the trade as a 'doughnut' with a soggy middle), and/or an ending which disappoints the reader because it doesn't answer that question that you cleverly postulated in your snappy beginning. So how can you keep up the pace, drive through that squelchy landscape in the middle section, and ensure that you snare that reader interest right to the very last word?

You may have other issues like 'I don't know what to write next.' Possibly 'I'm bored with it already.' Or maybe 'I want to write, I really do, but I'm just completely overwhelmed.'

I'm going to give you various options to deal with these. These will range from 'I have a vague idea of what's happening throughout' to 'I know exactly where I'm going right to the very last page.' The choice will be down to you and your preferred style of writing. However, bear in mind that this may well change as your writing career progresses - it certainly has for me.

PLANNING VERSUS EDITING

The main learning point for me over the years has been that what you don't do up-front at the planning stage, you pay for at the end in the editing. For instance:

Jane Blonde 1, Sensational Spylet

I didn't plan this at all, and it all came out very fast in a magnificent roller-coaster ride which took me about three weeks and was absolutely exhilarating. I knew that it was good (that shiver that we talked about in chapter 2) and indeed, it did find me an agent and a publisher pretty quickly.

However, my very wise editor wrote me a ten page report on all the various plot strands I'd written that weren't going anywhere; how I hadn't followed through on certain questions; how there were pieces missing that would make absolute sense of certain challenges, and where I also ought to capitalise on my own style (which I would often see as 'More like this, please!' in the margin).

I didn't have to re-write the whole book, but I had to spend a great deal of time sorting all these issues out and sending it back and forth to my editor three or four times. The version that was eventually published had probably been more or less re-written half-a-dozen times. **So 10% planning, 90% editing.**

#Jane Blonde 2, Spies Trouble

I hadn't been expected to be asked to write a second Jane Blonde, so I really had no idea what I was going to write about, and was somewhat nervous about it. However, I did recognise that the idea that had worked well in Sensational Spylet - the frozen frog from chapter 3 - was a theme that should perhaps be carried on into any further Jane Blondes. And yes, of course, by now I had my sights set on MORE Jane Blondes even though I hadn't been contracted for more than two at that stage.

The frozen frog was an animal, so I decided to make each of the Jane Blonde™ books feature something special about an animal. Janey's own special animal was her cat, Trouble, and from that unfolded the idea for my second Blonde book. What if Trouble had nine lives as all cats are meant to, and what if someone discovered the secret of how to create nine lives for themselves ... and what if that person was the enemy spy? They would be more or less immortal!

So the story became about Trouble being used in experiments, and the Enemy Spy revealing themselves to Janey who has to transform into Jane Blonde to thwart them.

All well and good. This time, at least, I had a vague idea of the overall storyline, and so I set to with a vengeance, plunging Trouble into all sorts of catastrophes (pardon the pun) and leaving Janey/Jane to work it out. At the same time, I hadn't quite worked out who the Enemy Spy was going to be so I let them play out their own role for me, and what transpired was a miserable character called Joy. I called her Badly-Named Joy and thoroughly amused myself with her. Finished the book, whacked it away to my editor. Done and dusted, thank you very much.

Unfortunately (or fortunately in the end) my editor didn't agree. Badly-Named Joy wasn't really working for her, and when she pointed out the many instances where this was the case I could see exactly what she meant.

Furthermore, Joy didn't really fit the bill of the first Enemy Spy I'd come up with in the first Blonde book, and that version had far more long-term appeal than Joy. And there were a few things in the plot that weren't stacking up or I hadn't rounded off properly, largely because I was trying to be clever and leave a few cliff-hangers to persuade the publisher that they just had to get me to write Jane Blonde 3 ... and 4 ... and however many we could agree on ... This is a no-no, and I now ensure that every single book in a series stands on its own while also feeding into the overall series storyline.

This time I had to do a substantial re-write, taking out Badly-Named Joy (or Badly-Written Joy as she turned out to be), fitting a new plot strand and creating a proper, complete ending around a different character. The right character. The one who should have been there in the first place.

So this time, **25% planning, 75% editing.**

Jane Blonde 3, Twice the Spylet

By now I had a very good idea of what I was doing with the overall series. Special animal ... special animal ...

This time I chose a sheep - a REALLY special sheep who in real life (if that's what we can call it) is called Dolly. And where do they have lots of sheep? Australia.

Already I had a setting (Oz), a challenge that would inform the plot (how Dolly was created), an Enemy Spy from books one and two, and a cast of supporting characters who were really starting to grow and attract a fan-base because of their various characteristics and how they related to Janey/Jane.

In addition, I had the experience of my last two books to draw upon. This time I did not stare into space for a few moments with a beatific smile on my face, then plunge myself into a month of furious, plot-less writing.

This time, I planned it.

Not word for word, and not so that I wouldn't have the opportunity to follow a thread creatively if the urge overtook me, but certainly with five or six pages of notes on what was going to happen throughout the whole book: how it would start, where it would go, what kind of mad inventions I would have to create for Janey to get to Australia, what the characters would be up to, what the climax would be, and how it would end altogether (properly, and not waiting for Macmillan to buy Book 4).

Then, and only then, did I set about writing. And what I discovered about the creative process, having done this very UNcreative thing of planning my book in a reasonably clinical fashion, was absolutely fascinating.

Because I knew where I was going, I could enjoy the journey.

Because I wasn't scratching my head waiting for a character to tell me what to say next on their behalf, I had an absolute ball going to town with each and every one of them.

Because I knew how it was going to end, I could make that ending and the show-down that led to it as spectacular a climax as I'd seen in any children's book, and the quality of my writing and ability to get that down on the page actually improved.

Planning did not make me less creative. It made me *more* creative.

I had a fantastic time writing that book. It's still one of my favourites in the Jane Blonde series, in part because I remember what a joy it was to write, and in part because I was free to go overboard with the idiosyncrasies of each character because I knew what I was doing with them.

And the feedback from my editor? She was delighted. Yes, there was still editing to undertake - additions or subtractions that she could see that I hadn't identified - but all in all the editing process was much shorter, and very much easier.

So this time it was 70% planning, 30% editing.

Of course, I'd like to suggest that I now plan 100% and have zero editing to do, but I'm still an unpredictable creative when it comes down to it, and sometimes I do just have to follow a flight of imagination to see where it goes. I usually regret it, but not always, so I like to leave an element of flexibility in my planning process so that my creative self can take over if the need arises. Nowadays, the ratio of planning to editing is probably 85% to 15%, or maybe 80/20. That 80/20 rule applies just about everywhere!

A note about series: in the end, the complete Jane Blonde™ series comprised seven books. I'd set out to write one, several years back, and didn't know that it would carry on to even more book, let alone six others.

By the time I got to book seven (which we'd agreed would be the last because it felt like the right length, and also because the number seven has special significance for spies ... 007) I was

planning up a storm. Each of the last few books had been well-planned, and I'd also started to point each of them at the overall ending for the series which I'd had in mind from JB 3, Twice the Spylet.

However, in the seventh book, Spylets are Forever, I had to tie together all the plot-strands that had gone on through the whole series when I hadn't planned them in the first place. This was certainly a challenge, but also one of those incredible channelling moments that you'll have from time to time while writing your books. I would suddenly realise that I'd put something in the first book completely unconsciously, because eventually it would lead to this point in the seventh book. Which I'd had no idea I was going to write.

So who did know, back in 2002 when I was writing Sensational Spylet, that one day in six years' time I would need this particular niblet of information to tie up the seventh book? I don't know the answer to that. But sometimes we get these little messages and reminders that we are not doing this on our own. And it's really rather wonderful.

Having said that, it's probably the not the greatest idea to wait for and expect divine intervention to allow you to complete your series satisfactorily. When I set about organising my next series of books, I let the series form as a whole in my mind first. Well, I say 'let.' Again, someone or something else was involved because the entire story popped into my head as a complete storyline with all its component parts. I've planned the overall concept and each of the books very carefully, and I am thoroughly, utterly enjoying writing them because I know where they're going, and I am sure the readers are going to enjoy coming on this journey with me.

I'll tell you this, too, just because I get asked it a lot: I do all my planning in long-hand, in pen, in one of my many A4 sized notebooks. I will often do this sitting in a cafe with a strong coffee to stimulate my creativity.

Then, the moment I start to write the book, I go to my desk and type everything into my computer. Somehow my long-term ideas seem to flow better when I write by hand, but then the book itself needs to appear in type like a real book.

You'll find some style that works for you. I'll give you some suggestions here that may help you, whether you're at the 20/80 end of the scale of not much planning and lots of changing afterwards, or the 80/20 type who prefers to do the work before writing to save lots of editing in the end.

FORMS OF PLANNING - KNOWING THE END

If you're a 20/80 planner, wishing for maximum flexibility in your creative process while still ensuring that you have some sort of structure in your story, then it may be enough for you to know what the ending of your book will look like.

Often in your beginning, you'll find that you posed some sort of question. It may be as straight forward as 'What's going on?' in which case your ending should clarify it for the reader so they say, 'Aha! So that's what was going on.' It may be more complex, such as 'Why has this character found themselves here when they don't belong?' If so, the ending will need to answer that question: 'The character was there because there was a quest for them to fulfil, and they hadn't been informed of it yet'. This is actually the case, for instance, in the first *Jane Blonde*TM.

Whatever the question that is set out either in the very beginning or certainly when the plot picks up because of a catalyst, you need to provide an answer by the end, or run the risk of disappointing your reader to the extent that they never come back for more of your books.

This is the reason my editor told me to tie up the loose ends in *Jane Blonde Spies Trouble* - she knew that leaving it too open, far from enticing people to read more, would actually put them off! Disappointment for the reader probably takes the form of outrage, with them throwing down the book and being incensed that they've just wasted several hours of their life reading something which didn't complete. A classic example in the world of children's books was

Lionboy, by Zizou Corder, which was published to a massive fanfare and then created widespread uproar because the ending wasn't really an ending. Other than that, it's a good book!

So it may simply be enough to ensure that you round off the story with an answer to the question you posed at the top of the story. If you can't think what that answer might be, then perhaps it will help to think of all the classic storylines and recognise that your story fits into one of these archetypes.

It's widely accepted that there is only a small number plotlines in the whole history of storytelling, and that every book (or film, or play, or short story) is simply a unique telling of that archetypal story. There isn't as much agreement on how many storylines there are, and it commonly varies between three and thirty six! However, my view is that there are probably five to seven (depending on whether some of these are actually sub-plots or narrative styles of the others).

Classic storylines include:

Romeo and Juliet, or star-crossed lovers, which is a basic background plot to many romances in the world, albeit they don't all end tragically like the Shakespearean version. There probably aren't too many children's books following this exact plot-line, though once we're into the Young Adult offerings, it's fair game.

Cinderella - or any story of rags-to-riches, low status to stardom, ugly to beautiful, and pretty much every Disney production ever written. Oh, and a series called Jane Blonde.

The Faustian pact, which means some kind of deal with the Devil in which the blackness of the character's heart leads to their ultimate downfall

The Quest. Find something and use it to conquer all (Lord of the Rings). Find several somethings and put them together to conquer all (Deltora Quest). Find something or several somethings and destroy them to conquer all (Harry Potter).

The Siege - bad guys are invading the good guys, and there must be a battle to end all battles (War of the Worlds, many fantasy novels, lots of dystopian Young Adult books, and of course Deltora Quest, Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings - which is why it's sometimes not so clear whether this a universal plot-line or the way of telling the story of another plot-line like The Quest).

Bear in mind that most if not all of the above can go into the overall universal storyline of 'Good versus Evil', though how evident that this in the story will depend on how it's written.

So how does this help you to work out the ending of your book? It's a little like knowing what question you're asking. Each archetypal storyline demands a certain kind of ending, and if you don't provide it you are likely to upset the reader:

In the Romeo and Juliet storyline, if boy didn't meet and girl get the boy (although Romeo and Juliet are dead when they get together) the reader would be devastated. Just think of the legions of teenage girls who would be out for Stephanie Meyer's throat if Edward hadn't won Bella's heart (and Jacob hadn't managed to find someone to love too, creepy though it is).

Similarly, in the Cinderella storyline, if rags don't turn to riches, or nerd turn to hero, or ugly duckling to swan, the fan-base of readers will soon dwindle. And if Frodo didn't get the ring to Mordor, what a tragic waste of time those three enormous books could be!

For you, then, it might simply be the case that you identify what type of story you're writing. Then you'll know that the ending has to fit. If it's a quest, they have to find the object and use it appropriately. If it's a siege, the goodies will have to win the battle, even if that's after a number of failures to keep the series going (as anyone who watches Glee will appreciate).

Of course, we can all think of examples where the ending does not fit the archetype, but in general that's where there's another book to come, or where the style is very literary and therefore unlikely to be your usual offering for the children's market, like *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne.

To round up this point, I'll touch on something that concerns many new writers - the issues of copyright and protecting your work. As you'll see from the short list above, there are really very few stories in the world, so it's very difficult to claim that an idea is yours and yours alone. If something appears that sounds incredibly like your book, it's still very, very unlikely that someone has stolen your work. It's far more likely that they just happened to have the same idea and perhaps worked on it more quickly than you, or were in a position to get it out there because they were already published.

By way of example, the author of the Alex Rider series, I saw Anthony Horowitz, being asked why he hadn't carried on with his Groosham Grange series. 'Let me tell you how that series goes,' he said. 'There's this boy, horribly treated by his adoptive family to the extent that they make him live in a cupboard. Then he discovers he's magic, and goes off to magic school, and ...' He didn't need to continue. J K Rowling had come up with something very similar, even while his books were coming out, and somehow she'd done it in such a unique way that it took off and took over. There was no suggestion whatsoever from this very professional and successful author and screenwriter that his ideas had been stolen or plagiarised.

If someone else has the same or similar idea, what makes your book unique is the way that you tell it. Another example - Jane Blonde™.

Shortly after the second Jane Blonde book had reached the shelves, my publishers received a letter from some American lawyers. Their client was a film-maker who'd had an idea for a girl spy called Jane Blonde, and had talked about that idea in England where I lived at one time, and in New Zealand where I lived at another. The implication was that I'd followed her around the world to steal her ideas.

This was absolute nonsense, of course. What we had to point out was that the name 'Jane Blonde' is simply a female version of 'James Bond' which anyone could have come up with, and with a name like that she'd be very likely to be a spy. The idea itself was not that original.

What I'd *done with it*, however, with my storylines and characters and writing style, was what made my books and my Jane Blonde unique. We didn't hear back from the lawyers. Strangely enough, though, it was around this time that I trade-marked Jane Blonde and began to use the little ™ symbol you'll have seen in this chapter ...

Once you've identified an end point, something to aim at, you'll have a linear plot-line which may be enough to sustain you as you write the rest of your book, particularly if you're not a planner and you're happy to correct after you've finished your book. Then your creative endeavours will lead you along this path, making sure that you have enough undulations and turn-offs along the way to make the plot interesting, and not as flat as it appears at present.

However, you may have a couple of concerns about this, the first being that you're not sure at this stage whether your creative capabilities are up to levering that plot-line off the floor, and you might end up with a plot that is satisfactory, but essentially is dull.

The other concern, and this is perhaps more likely to be the case than flat-lining as above, is that you'll do what I did in the early Jane Blondes. Your creative juices will be unleashed, and suddenly you'll go mad! Wild flights of fancy will lead you off in strange directions. Intriguing forks in the road will encourage you up the wrong path for a while and even though you *know* it's the wrong path, it's fun so you're just going to stay on it. Fascinating characters will beckon to you from around murky corners, and you won't be able to help yourself from sneaking off to find out what they have to tell you.

Sure, you'll get to that planned end point at some stage, but not after you've had some very interesting diversions, and probably remembered that other story you'd always intended to write and decided to fit it in here somehow as well.

The result will be a meandering, looping plot that folds back on itself several times so that your readers may get lost. You, yourself, may get lost, and you're writing it. While this may still lead to an entertaining read, you're likely to find yourself with a number of issues which do not work in plotting terms:

Boring bits, or the parts where you're not really sure where you're going but, you know, this field seems quite nice and then there's a house at the end, and anyway, the characters need some time to figure out what's going on and can sit down and have a good old chat about how they ended up here in the first place.

This may involve the odd **flashback** or two. The reader, sadly, doesn't really care. They need to move on. (By way of example, I'm sure I can't be the only one who was practically driven to ripping out pages in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, with their endless roaming around the forest, being moody ... and I am the most ardent of Harry Potter fans).

Forced diversions, where you've headed up a path and realised that it's not really going to work, so you somehow contort and re-align the plot to get back to your original path and plan.

This will probably look like something else which is a plotting no-no if it doesn't done on purpose - **the red herring**. 'I've just realised that the book with the clue was actually back there in House A,' your hero declares. 'I didn't need to come here at all! Thank goodness I worked it out for myself.' Yes, but couldn't you have done that back at House A, Maddening Main Character?

Coincidences, which occur when you realise you've backed yourself into a corner and the only thing that will help is if someone or something appears as if by magic. So as if by magic, they do. The gate-keeper with the keys jangling off his belt happens to wander by, or the tiny mouse that will fit under the door to get the amulet pops his whiskery head out of someone's pocket. 'Oh, I forgot I'd brought little Brodie, my pet,' your character announces. This is the first time we've heard of Brodie the pet. How convenient that Brodie the pet happened to be there. Remember, you can get away with introducing useful people and things later in the book, but *only if you've mentioned them earlier in the book*.

Okay, so if you're an editor not a planner, you're going to be content to deal with these at the end, or when your editor or manuscript assessor points them all out to you. Which they will.

The only creative work that I've ever come across that seems to work despite the fact that it seems to have been written this way is the movie, 'UP'. There are very strange unrelated events, odd characters turning up out of nowhere, plot-turns and coincidences that make no sense, and levels of incredulity that test even my outrageous imagination. I think the reason it works is firstly because it's a film and therefore a visual feast, and secondly because of its enormous charm. Again, I'm a big fan. This is one of those exceptions that proves the rule, however, and I would suggest in general that you don't try to translate the writing of children's books into what works for Disney and Pixar. But you might like to watch 'UP' so you can see what I mean!

Right. So assuming you're not writing UP 2 and would like to get a better handle on your plot-line, we want to look at a technique that will allow you to avoid the three bug-bears of plotting as outlined above, keeping your readers invested and intrigued and dogging your characters' every step as they stride on towards the end. Believe it or not, you already know this technique. You just haven't applied it to plotting.

Since I became a planner, I apply it to every single one of my plots, from a picture book of 600 words to a Young Adult novel of 90,000 words with three different narrators and a very complex plot. And it's a story you've known almost your whole life ...

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!).

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 eight or nine-year-old boy version, somehow EVERYBODY DIES!!

Anyway, after the wolf is dispatched, the three little pigs live together in the brick house, happily ever after.

Visually, this looks like this:

Home LEAVE! 1 pig 2 pig 3 pig CHIMNEY Home

The first thing you'll 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 your aim is just to identify your ending, 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. As we discussed in chapter 2, your catalyst may come some time after the beginning, or it may be entwined with your opening as in 'Bill's New Frock'.

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 good fights evil, 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 protagonists to reflect on what's gone on and what they need to do better, and

a satisfying clamber to the all-important 'chimney event' where the denouement/climax/exposition/final fight is going to take place, pulling all your plots and sub-

plots together into one wonderful triumphant revelation that makes the reader shout, ‘Aha! So that’s what it was all about.’

And all 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 how not to write a story. We’ll include the three bug-bears of plotting from above. Our character is called Red (for Herring), and visually the plot for his story could go like this:

Red WRITE!! Boring Diversions Coincidence EDIT! Red

Okay, so it might not be the most fascinating story ever (it’s going to look rather like *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, in fact) but you can see that Red the Herring would start with the quest of *having to write*. He’ll go through the first hurdle of Boring Bits, and then consider what he’s doing wrong. I know, he’ll say, I need a Diversion! He’ll try that and it won’t work, so on reflection he’ll work out that he needs something more dramatic, and will enter the Challenge of Coincidences.

But none of those people and interventions helped, he will discover - not at all! There’s nothing for it. He’s going to have to jump right into the overall battle, and edit the mad story to make sense of it! Ouch. It will hurt; it will be hard, but Red will emerge triumphant.

And then by the end, he will still look like Red Herring from the beginning, but where Red at the start was not a writer, Red at the end has discovered much about the challenges facing writers and how to overcome them that he is a fully-fledged story-teller and author.

Now again, depending on what kind of planner or plotter you are, that may be enough. Suddenly by thinking in terms of peaks of activity and chimney events, you may see a way through the morass of information that you knew you were going to have to tackle, and that could be sufficient to help you plough through your story.

What if it's a longer story, though? You may be writing a chapter book of 40,000 words, divided into twenty five chapters.

In that case I would suggest that you look at it this way, with each number being the chapters included in that peak of activity (in which case you should allow that the last chapter in that peak will have the most action in it, then a little downtime for the character to reflect and the reader to have a rest):

1 2-3 4-8 9-14 15 - 20 21 - 24 25

Then you might have an idea of what's happening in each block. For example,

Chapter 1 Meet Fred, who needs help

Chapters 2 and 3 Fred finds lamp

4 to 8 Finds genie, tricky

9 – 14 Genie disappears, leaves even bigger mess at home

15- 20 Finds Genie, evil!

21- 24 Fights Evil Genie for lamp, massively valuable, finds Genie's stolen gold

Chapter 25 Fred, who doesn't need help.

Again, visually this might look this this.

Fred LAMP genie Gone! Evil! GOLD!! Fred

That simple mapping will give you enough information about what's going on in each section of the book to know how much to write per chapter, and how much drama to go through in each peak of activity. It would be no good, for instance, if Fred discovered the Genie's gold collection

when he first found the lamp. He needs to acquire information slowly and build some enmity with the Genie to lead to the final battle for the gold (which Fred finds is what he really needs to help him, rather than a Genie ...).

So far so good.

What I like to do is go one stage further.

With this more detailed plan in mind, I then go on to write a paragraph for each chapter so that I know more or less what will happen in that chapter. Then, when I know exactly what direction I'm going in, I can sit back, enjoy the journey, and let that creative impulse flow into my writing. Having done a lot of planning, I can be sure of knowing that the story will be in very good shape by the time I've finished, unless I suddenly allow myself a diversion (and if that seems to be happening for good reason then I follow it). And of course, the amount of editing required to get it all into shape will be minimal.

So for Fred above, my plan (hand-written in my notebook) might look like this:

Chapter 1: Fred wakes up to discover his parents have gone missing. He's late for choir practice, and if he doesn't get there on time he's going to be beaten up by the two mean choristers at the Cathedral School. Then he finds a parcel on the kitchen table, left by Fillicent Brewer.

Chapter 2: He takes the parcel to choir practice. Boys one and two jump him. Ends up under bush with choir master looking for him. Covered in blood so decides to use parcel wrapping as bandage. If it works for Jack and Jill ... Unearths the lamp.

Chapter 3: Rubs the lamp. A genie appears. The genie looks rather like Mean Chorister One, which Fred kind of notices but dismisses. The genie offers him three wishes and Fred wishes for horrible revenge on mean choristers. Regrets wasting wish but too late, and the revenge backfires on him anyway.

And so on. This way, I'd end up with a few pages of chapter outlines, and plenty of scope for creativity. For instance, at this stage I have no idea how or why his parents have gone missing, who Fillicent Brewer is, why Fred is at a cathedral school (good singer, I'm guessing?). I don't know why the mean choristers have it in for him, or why Fred likes nursery rhymes. I don't really know the genie looks like Mean Chorister One, or what could go wrong to make the revenge backfire on him ...

But what I do know is ... I'm going to have heaps of fun finding all that out!

Now you have planned your beginning, your ending, and how to avoid doughnuts (soggy middles, remember?) and disappointments. You have identified your peaks and troughs and your chimney event. You have worked magic on your plot. You are Harry Plotter.

KEEPING ON KEEPING ON

However, all of this is for nothing if you can't make yourself sit down and keep writing. In the second chapter, we talked about beating procrastination and getting started. As this chapter is about sticking to the path and following it through to a satisfactory end, I'd like to share some ideas with you that might help if you're feeling demotivated as often happens to writers, especially in the middle of the book.

Write the end wherever you're up to. If you're struggling through Chapter Five and thinking of throwing in the towel, try considering that excellent ending you planned for yourself. Then write it. Somehow, knowing that the book can be finished and the ending will be great can spur you onwards to completing it. And if you consider what you're doing in chapters six to twelve as filling in the gaps so you can reach that wonderful end point, it will seem less daunting.

Don't over-edit. Particularly if you've planned and plotted quite well, you won't need to spend ages poring over yesterday's work to make sure you're on the right track. You've chosen your route and it's working - just stick to it, and then go over it once you've finished the whole

thing. I tend to read half a page of what I wrote yesterday, just to get back into my character's head and my writer's voice, and then I plough on.

Write something else. By this, I don't mean start another book, unless you're convinced that that's the way you'll work best. Just write something - an email, a letter, a blog entry - just to get into the swing of writing again. Then you can return to the book (which was looking huge and overwhelming) and start anew, refreshed and energised after your little amuse-bouche to whet the appetite.

Change your environment. Sometimes, just knowing that you're sitting at the same old desk in the same old dining room with the same old book in front of you that you've been working on for EVER can just make the whole task seem much more daunting. A change of scenery can work really well to extract you from the sensation that writing your book has become a chore. Or, worse still, your job. A job that you're not even getting paid for.

Take it somewhere fun. I sometimes find that my office becomes too quiet, so if I head off to a cafe and work in some ambient noise then I become invigorated again. Plus, they have nice coffee. Most of my recent books have been half-written in cafes.

Book a work-space When I know I'm going to have to get my head down and work solidly for a week or two to break the back of a book, I hire myself an office somewhere else. Yes, I have a perfectly good desk and space at home, but there is nothing more guaranteed to make me turn up somewhere and write than knowing that I've paid for it. There's the added benefit of changing your environment, too, and it's especially nice if you're in a designated writer's office or similar and can feel like a real writer while you're rubbing shoulders with other authors.

As with plotting, all these practical suggestions are to enable you to immerse yourself in your writing. There's no substitute for just getting on with it, but with 30,000 words and a slot of two hours every other day ahead of you, it can be very daunting. Plan ahead, both in writing and lifestyle, and you'll find it all much more easily achievable.

And now, with your story mapped out, you can get on and write it! We'll start to target it specifically to your audience in the next chapter, but for now just wave your writer's wand, and go to it. Enjoy.

SOMETHING TO TRY

Decide whether you're a planner or an editor. Are you 20/80 or 80/20?

Consider what type of story you're writing, and identify the kind of ending you need to supply. What is your ending likely to be? That gives you a linear road to follow.

Next, broaden the map. Have a go at taking this plot, or another idea from your what-ifs, then putting a key word or two on your beginning and end, on three peaks of increasing intensity and size, and on your chimney event.

If you have more chapters than peaks, decide how many chapters will go in each peak. You'll find there are more chapters in later peaks and the chimney event, though they'll probably be shorter.

Now, if you're ready, sketch out a quick outline for each chapter.

Then write a whole chapter for each paragraph. If you're feeling dispirited, use one of the tools in this chapter to keep on keeping on.

SUMMARY

Doughnut middles and disappointing endings are commonplace in book-writing, especially when tackling longer pieces of work. Planning ahead can help.

There's often a direct ratio between the amount of planning done by the writer, and the amount of editing that will have to take place when it's completed. Aim for a higher percentage of planning to editing.

Think of the ending - does it answer your question? What's the right ending for your archetypal story? Working towards your ending can help you stay on track. You may even want to write it first.

Plotting using the three little pigs technique enables you to plot effectively, irrespective of the size or type of book you're working on. It's ideal for picture books through to complex YA fiction - and once learned, it's never forgotten!

You can have a clear idea of the route without halting your creative process, for example, by writing chapter outlines.

Sometimes it can be hard to stay on track with the writing process, particularly in the middle of the book when the ending seems a long way ahead and you're sure that what you're writing must be dull and stodgy. Try some practical solutions to stay motivated.

Chapter 5 The Age Game

Knowing your audience

So far, we've talked in general terms about writing your children's books. We've discussed what it takes to sit down and allow yourself to get creative and actually start writing. We've analysed what makes a great beginning, and hopefully you've written one or two. We've covered plotting and planning, and how to continue your story on through a daunting middle section to a rousing, triumphant finale.

These are all important - nay, essential - considerations for all your books, and by now you may well have a wonderful children's book underway with a sparkling opening and superb storyline.

However, thus far we've been discussing children's books as one complete 'genre' and all the guidelines we've followed so far will work whether you're writing for a five year old child or a fifteen year old not-really child.

What will not work, of course, is giving the same piece of writing to your five year old child or fifteen year old not-really child. The five year old would look at the older piece with about as much interest and understanding as if you'd just handed them Sanskrit on parchment. The fifteen year old would naturally be able to read the five year old piece, but they would wonder if you were deliberately insulting their intelligence and probably be extremely dismissive. They might even roll their eyes and make your name last a good two minutes in the droning of it.

Different ages require different things of their children's books (and yes, the fifteen year old Young Adult novel will still fit into the broader category of children's books, the emphasis being on the work 'Young' rather than 'Adult'). Okay, you may be saying, but I would recognise that they are very different readers - no way would I be trying to give them the same thing to read! True. That is a very broad age-range. You'd be surprised, though, how often I hear people telling me that they're writing a children's book that will "appeal to everybody, old or young!" Or they

might have a children's book for five to ten year olds, seven to twelve year olds, eleven to eighteen year olds and so on.

The age ranges are still pretty broad, and while it will always be possible to find a genius seven year old who reads books for twelve year olds and a bit of Proust in their spare time, those are the exceptions rather than the rule.

In fact, having spoken with the parents of seven year olds of this ilk, I know that they'll often mention it not because they're proud (although they are, of course), but because they're concerned. Their seven year old may well have the ability to comprehend the language, follow the story, enjoy some of the set pieces; what they won't have is the maturity to handle some of the content. I have a large following of such readers because their parents know that their clever youngster is not going to come across anything inappropriate in Jane Blonde or Jack BC, even though they are read by twelve year olds.

Those parents struggle to find appropriate material because a book that's right for a seven year old is very different to a book that's right for a twelve year old. Even a gifted under-eight is still a kid, while at twelve you're nearly a teenager, and some of those tweens are very grown up indeed.

So the sub-sections in age ranges in children's books are much, much narrower than these broad-brush approaches. There may be a wide range into which a book may fall that's called 8 - 12, but within that there will be a much tighter category of 9 - 11, with allowances for the stronger eight year old readers, and those twelve year olds who still prefer or require a younger read.

What you'll have started to infer from all this is that age ranges in children's books are very tightly defined. You might not see them as such in the bookshops, but the bookseller will naturally be keen to keep the categories broader in order to sell to as many people as possible, or they may well have limited space to display books so can't break them down into all the sub-sections. You should also avoid telling potential purchasers that 'My book is for 8 - 10 year olds' as they will then refuse to buy it for any seven or eleven year olds.

Publishers, however, think in tight age ranges - the younger the reader, the smaller the range. And your reader (or the person buying the book for them) has an even tighter age range in mind, which is five tomorrow, eight and three quarters, twelve but nearly thirteen in four weeks, two days and sixteen hours - in other words, exactly how old the reader is themselves.

As a writer of children's books, it will benefit you enormously to start thinking of your audience, ie the reader. What you will do by considering your end reader carefully and writing something that's right for them is two-fold: one, you'll write a better book, and two, you'll make it much easier for a publisher or a bookseller to accept your book.

One of the most common tendencies of new writers is to have their very adult voice popping up throughout, and main characters who are adults. Strangely, they're often adult characters who are very like the writer: a whacky dad, an exuberant grandma, a kooky uncle ...

Of course, it's tempting to write your story for yourself, because you're enjoying it all so much, but just stop from time to time to remind yourself how old you are. Not too often, but now and again. Otherwise what you'll find yourself doing is putting yourself into the story, or what you think is funny/entertaining/scary into the story, and suddenly this becomes a book which is meant to be for seven year olds and is actually a children's book for a thirty seven year old.

Think of it as a supply chain. Your reader needs a book that's right for them. The bookseller, library and the publisher (for different reasons!) want to provide them with books that are right for them. So you, the author, can supply what they all need, just by considering your audience.

Considerations

So what are the factors you need to consider, depending on the age you're writing for? There are some obvious ones like length - you're not going to write something the size of Twilight for a four year old. Then there are some more subtle things to think about, like which voice you'll use.

In no particular order, as you'll have to take them *all* into account, these are some of the items which vary according to the age of the reader:

Wordcount

I mentioned very early on in the programme that you'll need to start thinking in terms of wordcount. I hope you've been busy counting every individual word in your favourite children's books! If not, don't worry; I'll give you some guidelines at the end. And it's very easy to check in Word how many words you've written: just go to Review, and somewhere over to the left on that toolbar there should be a little 123 symbol. Click on there and it will give you your total wordcount for your book, or as much as you've written so far. If you'd like to see how many words are in a section - a chapter, perhaps - then just highlight the whole section and click on the same symbol, and it will give you the count for that section only.

I've just done it for what I've written in this chapter: 1,287 words to date. Overall, this book is about 50,000 words, which I know is fine for a non-fiction, personal development type of book. It's also the approximate length of the others in the Writers Gotta Write series, so again, I know it fits the brand.

I use this function several times a day when I'm writing, as I aim to write a certain number of words per day. When I've passed that number, I finish that chapter, and then I can relax. It's very useful. For instance, when the time comes for you to submit your manuscript to a publisher, if that's what you want to do, you're going to have to write down the wordcount on your cover page. Editors are very good at guessing wordcount, so there's no point in trying to fool them, but they also like to have a rough guide to the overall size of your book.

And why? You got it. So they know if it fits in the age range.

Illustrations

This particular book is not about writing picture books, because that's a whole different discipline in some respects, but it would be remiss of me not to mention them in the milieu of

children's books. Picture books are generally for up to five years old, and they are naturally heavily illustrated. Sometimes they are 100% illustration, with no text, but more usually there's a 50/50 split between the emphasis on text and on pictures. (If you're interested in learning more about writing picture books, go to my author academy for more information).

However, picture books are not the only children's books with illustrations. All of them have cover designs, of course, which are not necessarily illustrated and may have been created by a graphic designer, but some of them also have pictures throughout. Whether there are in full colour, a couple of colours or are just line drawings will depend on the age range, and how big they are, how many there are, and how often they're featured in the book will also depend on the reader age.

This isn't exactly relevant here, but I know you'll want to know so I'll just mention it in passing:

No, you don't have to supply your own illustrations or recommend someone who can do them for you, as the publisher will have a stable of illustrators they like to use anyway;

No, you might not get to choose who does illustrate your book as the publisher is likely to do that for you, though you might get the chance to say if you really do or don't like them;

Regarding the cover, if you're going with a traditional publisher you will get some limited consultation over the cover design, but they will have the final say. Mostly they're right, as in the case of Jane Blonde where I really didn't want a manga, cartoon-type character but discovered that it works brilliantly. Sometimes they're not, to which anyone who comes across a 2010 copy of my adult novel, *THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MAN IN THE WORLD*, will testify ... But generally, they know your book, they know what sells, and they marry the two together very well.

For people publishing their own work, you will have to do all of the above - finding illustrators and designers, checking their output, fitting it to the audience and so on - which may be quite

time-consuming and difficult if you don't know where to start. But you'll have lots of freedom at the same time, and that can be a lot of fun!

Content

Deciding what your story is about is going to be dictated to a large degree by what age you're writing for. Not only are there the concerns about what's *appropriate*, as for the parents of advanced readers mentioned earlier; there's also the need to remember that children are just interested in different things at different ages.

Having worked in a children's bookshop, it's quite amazing to see what appeals. What you might think is clichéd and unoriginal for an age group (fairies, pirates, teenage love affairs) is absolutely what the readers themselves gravitate towards. It's as if they're pre-programmed at birth to favour different things at four, six and ten, regardless of whether we as parents, teachers and care-givers have tried to keep them interested in a topic (ballet, soccer, advanced maths) or tried to persuade them to give up on it (dead bodies, cockroaches, kissing technique).

In very broad terms the subject matters to concentrate on for content might be categorised as:

Pre-school (0 – 4): Me (where I live, who I live with, family, what I see on TV, hear at Playgroup)

Primary (5 – 10): My world (home, school, friends, other kids), moving into other worlds (magic, fantasy)

Intermediate (11- 12): The wider world (other worlds plus conflict, adventure, science, sports)

High School (13 – 17): Me again (where I live, who I live with, who I want to live with, what I see on TV)

Again, these are very broad ranges. You'll see particularly that the 'primary' age covers two sets of worlds - that's pretty broad indeed! But as I've already mentioned, these are much wider age ranges than you'll be using for writing your children's books. We'll start to focus down into those sub-categories soon.

Gender bias

If we find it hard to accept that a topic will appeal to a child reader simply because it's what they're into at their age, then it's almost impossible to accept that there is definitely a gender bias in their choice of children's books.

Please don't shoot the messenger here, but again, from my observations in the bookshop I worked in, girls do float towards the pink, sparkly and cute even while their parent is pointing out something more rugged and suitable (in their mind), and boys do like a bit of blood, mud and gore and some feisty fighting. At any age. The subject matter may alter, the characters may be different, but it is absolutely true that in reading terms, boys are blue and girls are pink.

A case in point - the Jane Blonde books. Inside those covers, there's an adventure spirited enough for any young man, but unless they've disguised it inside some other book jacket it's unlikely that you're going to find many boys reading Jane Blonde. Firstly, it's about a girl, and secondly, the cover of the first book is pink. Bright pink. And a little bit sparkly.

I do have some brave boy fans - we correspond covertly so as not to expose them to the ridicule of their friends - but the vast majority of my fan-base is female.

When the second book was coming out, the publishers changed their mind on the cover design, and decided not to make it blue as intended (and advertised in the first book). They made it purple instead - a *girl* colour. Well, you might say, those are just marketing decisions. They don't prove anything.

But just consider this: the book which sells less than any of the others is the third book in the series, Twice the Spylet. I told you in a previous chapter that it's one of my favourites, and there's no reason fans shouldn't love it just as much as the others. But there we have it - two books sell well, bit of a dip, then books four to seven sell well. There's only one explanation that they publishers can come up with, and that's the colour of the cover. It's blue.

Something else that's interesting about this, however, is that boys didn't rush out and buy the third book because it had a blue cover. It's still a girl's book in their eyes.

This is something to bear in mind. Girls are much more forgiving about titles, covers, and content, and will happily read a 'boy' book even though it doesn't contain any girls, girly fripperies, or glitter. Girls love 'How to Train Your Dragon' for instance.

Boys, on the other hand, will generally not read a girl book. So if you're writing for girls, be aware that you are probably writing just for girls. Don't waste your time trying to make it appeal to boys as well - you'll just muddy the writing and confuse everyone, including yourself.

If you're writing a boy book, on the other hand, you may well find lots of girls are prepared to read it. Again, you don't need to go putting female characters in to make it appeal to them, and you may even weaken the story if you do - only put them in if they matter to the storyline.

And unless you're a much practiced writer, please don't spend ages trying to revive women's lib to overcome the gender bias and make your story appeal to absolutely everyone - not until you get into the older age ranges, at least. We all know stories that anyone will read, but honestly, the gender split is there. It exists. Don't fight it. Use it to your advantage instead.

What I mean by that is the following. If you go to the publisher with your cover sheet on your neatly laid-out manuscript declaring "23,000 words, boy bias, title Death by Dinosaur", they are going to see that you know what you're doing. That will impress them far, far more than: "30,000 words, girls and boys everywhere from four to forty, title United We Stand".

Voice

We'll be going into narrative voice in a later chapter, and it's rather a complex subject which deserves lots of attention and practice.

For now, just be aware that the majority of children's books up to about age ten are written in the third person (he, she, it), and thereafter you might find fewer written in the first person (I). There are exceptions, of course - my own picture book, KAVE-TINA ROX, for instance - but if you stick to that rule of thumb you won't be doing anything wrong or risky.

Similarly with tense: most books up to age ten are in the past tense and have fairly linear time-lines, beyond ten they might be in the present tense and/or have more complex time-lines.

The age ranges

Aha, I hear you cry. Finally we come to it - those age ranges!

As mentioned before, the younger the reader is, the narrower the range is. As the reader gets older and their experiences and abilities begin to vary so much more, the ranges get broader. By the time we get to purely adult fiction, we mostly categorise by genre rather than age as it's no longer a key issue.

One important thing to bear in mind is that children tend to read upwards in age. They like to read about an age they aspire to be soon, rather than someone who's younger than them. A five year old will happily read (or hear) about a seven year old, but a seven year old would rather die than have to listen to (or read) a story about some five year old baby.

For that reason, it's probably a good idea to place the age of your reader towards the top end of your age bracket. Or don't mention the age at all, then no judgement can be made! Whenever anyone asks me how old Jane Blonde is, I ask them how old they are, nod wisely, then tell them: 'She's just about your age' ...

Age range 0 - 4

This is the youngest age range, and is actually subdivided many times over, into new born to six months, six months to eighteen months, eighteen months to two, two to three, three to four and then four to five and onwards. These will all be picture books of some kind, so I won't go into

them in detail, but the wordcount is likely to be anywhere between zero and a thousand words, and they'll be heavily illustrated.

Age range 4 - 5

Slightly more text and story-based picture books, which might focus on the things that the kids are doing at pre-school, or with parents, or just fun adventures. There may be a growing gender bias with boys into trucks, dinosaurs and pirates, and girls into princesses, cute animals and fairies.

Age range 5 - 7

By now, the reader will have started school - by seven they may be a couple of years into it. Their horizon has expanded and so has their ability to read, so they might now be reading for themselves.

Many children in this age bracket still love their picture books, but often their 'adults' want them to progress on to chapter books. I say let them have what they want, as long as they're reading! However, this is why many of the chapter books at this stage will still have full colour illustrations, and many of them. The text will be large, with lots of white space around it, and it might still be playful with interesting formatting and so on.

At the age seven end of the bracket, this might have been toned down a little, perhaps with few colour pictures, or just with line drawings. There will still be a lot of space around the text, to make the book easier to read, and wordcount will go from around 1000 at the bottom end, to perhaps 5000 words for a longer chapter book. 1000 word books won't really have many chapters, while a 5000 word book might have six or seven chapters of about 800 words each. The gender split will be getting more extreme with girls still into their fairies, pet-related stories, and mermaids etc, with boys enjoying anything mucky - bugs, snakes, pooh and so on.

Age range 7 - 9

At this age, the gender bias becomes even more prominent. Boys will be into toilet and sarcastic humour, piratical adventure, and perhaps some sports as well as action stories, while girls are tending more towards their hobbies and home or school activities - dancing, ballet, clothes, cute animals, and a growing obsession with horses.

The wordcount will range from about 6000 up to as much as 20000 +, though even at this top end they could include line drawings. The lower end may still have full colour. They will all have a beginning, a middle and an end, in that order, and won't involve flashbacks and backstory. It's all just there on the page, for the reader to take in.

Age range 9 - 11

As we mentioned earlier, by about age nine, children can really start to get their heads around more complicated time-lines, more involved plots and multiple narrators if necessary. They are also fascinated by their expanding world, though by now some are more intimidated by it too.

This is where you'll often find readers escaping into fantasy, magic, other worlds and so on - somewhere where they can be powerful, like the character within the pages. This is also the start of the age of the avid reader, where children escape and lose themselves in a book completely, so they can be longer and more absorbing, but not too overwhelming for the younger or the less able reader.

Boys and girls alike will be more interested in magic and fantasy beyond the usual witch/fairy combination, but girls especially love this genre. They're both also getting into the idea of a series; once they've connected with a character they like to re-visit them and grow with them a little. Girls love their horses, fantasy and strong girl characters to admire, while boys are into an action-based character, adventure, sporting prowess, gadgets and so on. For both, it's really about an enhanced sense of power, and the ability to lose oneself in a book.

Wordcount can be from around 25,000 words at the younger end, to as much as 60,000 words at the older end. The norm used to be about 35,000, and then Harry Potter came along ... My Jane Blondes, which are in this age group, are between 55,000 and 65,000 words. My sense is that the wordcounts in this age group are already reducing or are going to start coming down again soon, so mid-range might be a good place to aim.

Age range 11 – 14

This is an age range which takes in some eleven year olds who are still very much small children, while also catering for the older ones who are moving into adulthood. They're still interested in that 'other world' imagery, so fantasy interest is strong, as is science fiction and the supernatural (in which we'll include young vampire readers).

Boys have a fascination for empowered boys - spies, special agents, commandoes, and survival, which might include war-based historical fiction, whereas girls might at this stage be getting into social historical fiction, as well as magical fantasy material that tends slightly towards the romantic. In addition they'll enjoy humour, school-based books, and topics which match the current trend for reality TV talent spotting.

The wordcount for this age range has a broad span: a boy-bias spy story for the younger end of the age group might be around the 30,000 level, while romantic historical fiction featuring the odd blood-sucking ancestor might well reach up to 80,000.

Young Adult (YA)

This category of fiction is still reasonably new, and seems to have sprung originally from people being uneasy with classing older teens as children, while recognising at the same time that they haven't yet reached adulthood.

It's caused a fair bit of confusion and seems to have incorporated some books that are actually genre fiction for adults, and some works that are actually literary fiction and not children's books

at all. Because they feature children, they are therefore called children's books, but as they're an uncomfortable fit for children's books they're shoe-horned into this new, all-encompassing category. Examples of these include *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon, *The 10pm Question* by Kate de Goldi, and to some extent the trilogy of *His Dark Materials* by Phillip Pullman. In the US, there's now a tendency to class 11+ fiction as young adult as well.

My interpretation of Young Adult is that it's for older teens and above who can expect and deal with some more grown up content in their books. This might include swearing, sexual content, drugs and alcohol and so on, but it doesn't mean that it has to. The 'grown up content' might mean family break-ups, mental health issues, or something that the younger reader would not have sufficient understanding of to interpret and handle appropriately.

The characters in YA novels are likely to be 16 - 19, a couple of years older than the fourteen year olds who may start getting into this genre. It's also interesting to note that readers in this age group sometimes jump straight to adult fiction, either reading the classics, picking up what their parents are reading, or finding some genre fiction like horror or romance that suits the readers' needs.

At present there's a gradual leaning away from what we know as dystopian YA, about the end of the world and post-apocalyptic events. Publishers tell us this is less popular, and that they would be interested in issue-based YA which focusses on teen issues in general, although there still seems to be a significant uptake of dystopian YA like *The Hunger Games*. The former can often be series or trilogies, while issues-based books are often one-off or stand-alone novels.

It's probably fair to say that boys lean towards the dystopian, and girls towards the issue-based, although there are obviously exceptions. Standard themes therefore include post-apocalyptic conflict, fantasy, romance, issues like pregnancy, drugs and alcohol abuse, and bullying.

Wordcount can actually come down from the top end of the previous age range, and it's common to find YA books to be around the 50,000 word level, although many are up to 80,000 words or more.

Beyond this we get into adult fiction, and again, that's a different book!

Your book

So now, taking all of that into consideration, I'd like you to think about where your own preference for children's book might lie. It may not be where you think it should.

My own preference is to write for 9 - 11 year olds, taking in some of those younger and older readers either side of that. Many people assume that's related to the age of my daughter, but it never has been and never will be (and funnily enough, she hasn't been 9 - 11 for the whole of the last ten years!).

It's just that it's the age group where I write in my most authentic voice. It's the age I remember most clearly from when I was a child, and the age at which I was that voracious reader eating up stories day in and day out. Many authors find the age they write for increases at the same rate as the age of their own children. This isn't the case for me, but it may be for you.

You could have a look back at some of those memories you jotted down when we were thinking about your demons, nags, teachers and incentives. See what you can deduce from what you remembered most vividly. It may be that all the most evocative memories are from the same couple of years, when you were a certain age. Alternatively, it could be that some of your writing is more fluid or poignant than the rest; if so, this could be the age that you should write for. The age you were when that happened, or this person appeared.

We'll talk more about voice in later chapters, but for now, think about the age of your reader, and if you know the reader is you at a certain age (as it is for me), then consider how you would shape the book to suit them best. It's like giving someone a gift that you've really pondered over,

just to be sure that it's the most wonderful present you could ever have given them, rather than just pulling something random off the shelf with no thought for the individual.

Giving can be fun. And if you're the recipient of the gift, it's even better.

SOMETHING TO TRY

Think about the book you want to write, and apply all the guidelines listed in this chapter: wordcount, illustrations, content, characters and so on.

Then create a cover sheet as if you were sending your book off to a publisher. Remember that it should include:

Title

By

Your name

A book for girls/boys aged

Wordcount

Summary

It helps to think about who will be reading your book as you're writing it. This helps to stop your adult voice poking through, and targets your book more effectively.

The age ranges in children's book are pretty narrow and distinct, and the younger the reader, the narrower they are.

There are a number of considerations to focus in on the right age group, including content, wordcount, illustrations, and voice and tense.

There are always exceptions to every rule, but the age guidelines are consistently used by publishers, booksellers and libraries to categorise children's books.

Chapter 6 It's Character Building

Don't you hate it when people say things like that to you? Go on, it's character building. Face your fears, it's good for you. Jump off this tall building, you won't regret it. Kids, especially, hate it! It's all too similar to those dreaded words: 'Just do it, because I said so.'

But when it comes to your characters, while you may be lucky enough to find that you don't have to work at them terribly hard, the likelihood is that there will be at least one or two characters that you have to create from scratch. You have to *build* them from the ground up, starting by digging some firm foundations. And then when you've traced their steps up several storeys, you may take them to the top of that tall building, tell them to jump, and see how they react.

Their response will tell you and the reader everything you need to know about the person you've created. If it doesn't, then it's possible you don't yet know enough about that character.

That's what we're going to talk about in this chapter: getting to know your characters; thinking them through; growing to love (or hate/pity/admire) them. Over the last few chapters, we've focussed heavily on one key element of any book, and that is the story or plot.

However, our stories would be very lacklustre without people - or the animals, aliens, mud-grubs or whatever you've decided to use to populate your story world. The other critical half of any book, especially for children, is the characters.

I use the term 'half' loosely: it may be that your book is very character-led, in which case there may be less of a power-driven plot. Alternatively, your book may be entirely story-based and adventuresome, so some of your characters could be less developed.

But you get the picture: a story has two elements, plot and character, and in this chapter we're going to discuss character, though not in isolation as your plot will need to be carried through, carried out, just plain *carried* by your wonderful cast of characters.

Where characters come from

For me, there are two ways that the characters for my books are formed: some are made, and some make themselves.

The characters who make themselves:

Certain characters have a way of appearing in your head completely fully-formed. These are the ones that make themselves. There's no saying where they came from (unless you can work it out with a few years of counselling), but suddenly there they are, telling you what to say on their behalf, instructing you as to what they would do in a given situation. When you take *these* characters to the top of a tall building, without hesitation they will give you a shove instead, or whip out their parachute and leap, or run in the opposite direction towards the safety ladder. Let's face it, they may even be the ones to take you to the top of a tall building.

You may have heard that J K Rowling first met Harry Potter on a train when he walked into her head as a real live boy, complete with a zigzag scar and broken spectacles. The same was true for me with a character in Jane Blonde - though not, interestingly, Jane Blonde herself.

No, the character who appeared in my head, resplendent in lycra, Day-Glo accessories and a penchant for rapping was Jane Blonde's tutor, G-Mamma. She even arrived with her own name, which she thought was cool for a middle-aged rap star, as well as being a contemporary version of the more traditional 'godmother' which is what she really is for Janey Brown/Jane Blonde.

From the very outset, G-Mamma told me what to say about her, gave me awful raps to write down, and even told me what clothes to dress her in. I've never once had to question her motives, or think how she'd react in a given situation, or wonder what she's going to say,

because she does it all for me. Bossy she may be, but that kind of character is a gift. Ignore them at your peril!

What's also interesting to me as the creator of G-Mamma (ha! or so she lets me believe, she's telling me now) is that I could actually *see* her. Often I don't have a very clear idea of what my characters look like, and I can live with that. As long as I have a fundamental grasp of how someone behaves, and feels, and reacts, then I'd rather leave their appearance to the imagination of the reader. Many authors are the same; they'll have a complete sense of their character's personality traits, but no absolute image of how they look.

And what does G-Mamma look like? You may well ask. Many, many readers imagine that she's a cuddly African-American lady. Aretha Franklyn's name has been bandied about a fair bit in relation to G-Mamma. Queen Latifah, too. And if that's how the reader sees her, then I'm not going to disabuse them of the notion.

However, while nowadays I can see that Miranda Hart is the living, earthly embodiment of my character, to the extent that I wonder how I could have imagined her before I saw her on TV, in my mind at the time of writing, G-Mamma always looked like Dawn French in a curly blonde wig. Google Dawn French if you don't know who she is. Could she and Aretha Franklyn be more different?

Actually, apart from the colour of their skin, I believe they are very similar, and all (Miranda included) are very like G-Mamma: strong, warm, talented ladies who are comfortable in their skin, and beautiful inside and out. So it's fine by me if the reader takes that information and translates it into someone who fits the bill in their own imagination.

And just for information, I have clear ideas of what Bone looks like in Jack BC and the Curse of Anubis (comedian Bill Bailey, but balder), what Kave-Tina looks like in Kave-Tina Rox (a combination of my daughter and a friend's daughter aged about six), and the appearance of the eponymous man in my adult novel, *The Most Beautiful Man in the World* (who starts out as Paul

Martin, the antique dealer from Flog It, and ends up as George Clooney). Just in case any producers are reading this and would like to start casting the films ...

The characters who are made:

It's not necessarily your main character who has the foresight to help you out by turning up ready-made. In my case, it's usually the side-kicks who do this. With the central characters, it can be necessary to gather information, to decide how, where and when they're going to carry the plot for you, and give them the means to do that.

For instance, Jack Bootle-Cadogan who is Jack BC (in what was formerly Doghead) was created backwards, from the point where all I knew about the plot was that a boy would discover he'd been cursed to become Anubis, Egyptian God of Death (actually of Embalming, but you're allowed to stretch the truth in your writing).

Suddenly I remembered a visit I had made many years ago to Highclere Castle in Hampshire, England - the castle that is now featuring in the TV series, Downton Abbey. That was - is - the home of the Carnarvon family, and one of the ancestral Carnarvons was the Lord who discovered the tomb of Tutankhamen. It's a fascinating place to look around, with hidden drawers holding Egyptian artefacts and a dusty museum with authentic relics and tools.

The moment I remembered that, I knew that the boy-who-turned-into-Anubis would have to live there. Then, rather than that rags-to-riches story of the Cinderella archetype, I thought it would be fun if the boy had riches, but wanted rags.

And that's how Jack Bootle-Cadogan came about: a posh, rich boy who lives in a castle with everything most people would dream of, including their own butler, who wishes only to be normal and go to the local state school. This fed into the story fantastically well, because not only would he be considered far from normal because of his upbringing and background, but then he would start to develop the head of a dog, which would single him out from just about

everybody. Poor Jack: a boy who considers himself completely ordinary who's doing his very best to convince everyone else of the same, with all the odds increasingly stacked against him.

His name, by the way, was also created backwards. I started off calling him Seth, which I thought was an unusual name for a book character with a nice Egyptian God ring to it. Then I started doing more research, and discovered that Seth would have to be the evil nemesis that he's trying to thwart.

Searching for a name for my boy, I came up with the name he should have had all along. He is, after all, part jackal. And so Seth became Jack. The surname Cadogan (pronounced Caduggan) comes from a lovely shop that I used to pass in Winchester, UK, when I lived there, which seemed to epitomise all things posh. I then combined it with Bootle which is also a place in England, but which I actually borrowed from the Gerald Durrell book, *My Family and Other Animals*. It's the name of the coracle that his brothers made him for his birthday, and which they christened 'The Bootle Bumtrinket'. I've loved that book for thirty five years and just found the words incredibly pleasurable to say aloud. I added it to Cadogan, and my lovely lad Jack Bootle-Cadogan finally had his full and rightful name. It's also rather useful that it can be abbreviated to Jack BC, which gives him a certain historical ring ...

Jane Blonde's character came from a similar backwards route. I'd had the name of Jane Blonde rattling around in my brain for years, but when the plot came to me (in the shape of a frozen frog, if you recall) I wanted to establish who this spy-girl would be when she wasn't being styley and fantastic.

I started the reversal process with her name. Blonde is obviously a hair colour, so I decided to go with another hair colour that might indicate a less-than-spy-like nature. I chose brown. As I have brown hair myself, I don't necessarily see this as a character flaw! But I thought it would seem bland and ordinary enough to evoke a feeling of mousiness about the non-spy version of Jane.

Next, I attacked her first name. It couldn't be too far from Jane, so I just stretched it to make it 'Janey' instead, which sounds rather more vulnerable and possibly a little younger than Jane.

Once I had the Janey Brown/Jane Blonde alter-ego fully established, I instantly found a hundred traits that Janey Brown might have that Jane Blonde would not have. She would have to be a tad shy. She would feel invisible. She would want to fit in and not know where to start. In other words, she would be like millions of school girls around the planet who are not blessed with super-powers.

At the same time, I found a character arc too: while Janey is very happy at first to become stronger, more determined and more able when she's encased in silver lycra with handfuls of gadgets, she gets to the point where she wants to be like that all the time.

Slowly, over the course of several books, Janey works out that she IS Jane Blonde. Nothing changes apart from the appearance, and all the many things she accomplishes come from her very nature. It takes her a long time to realise it, and it's actually the core of the issue she fights with at the end of the series, but when the two halves of her ego snap together, then the reader cheers and is satisfied, and the character is fully extended.

Of course, it might not be entirely straightforward to build up your character in the same way that I created Jack and Janey. I've been telling you that you may need to create your people from the ground up, and there I am explaining how I made mine from the roof down. As with all creative processes, how you create your characters is going to be driven somewhat by your natural tendencies and the way your mind works. Mine obviously works backwards. There will be many people who are not surprised to learn that!

Whichever way you do it, whether it's backwards or forwards or sideways, the critical point is that you must know your character well enough so that you can release information about them to the reader, little by little. It's fine for you to know every freckle on their face intimately, but you might want to leak that image to your audience over time. You might - you probably should - be fully aware of every fight Fred ever had with his teacher or his brother, but you won't want to list them all out unless it's crucial for the story.

You will want to know all these facts, however, so there is never any doubt in your mind as to how Fred would react if a battle was ensuing, or how Freckly Freda would feel if someone pointed out for the millionth billionth time that lemon juice might work. It's for you to know, and the reader to find out.

You can establish some of this background information in a number of ways. You might like to internet-research someone who you know is rather like your character and compile a dossier on them. You could combine the characteristics of several people you know (I often do this). You might carry out a mock interview with them, asking questions like: 'What would you do if I took you to the top of a tall building and told you to jump?' Or you could simply find out what their favourite colour/food/celebrity/music is and then know enough about them to feel you could respond on their behalf to any situation.

What you might find useful is to fill out a character chart, although you could add in or take out any categories that didn't necessarily appeal to you. All you do is draw a grid and fill it in with details of a few categories. You can have as many categories as you like, and use the grid for as many characters as you like. The categories I like to use are: name, age and birthday, family arrangement, mannerisms, what makes them laugh and cry, and what underwear they might like to wear.

Taking each in turn:

Name

I've talked somewhat about how names can be created, and sometimes they just come to you. The name of the character for my new series, Matilda Peppercorn, was gifted to me by my mother who found it in some old parish records from the nineteenth century, although she's very different to a nineteenth century girl.

The name of her best friend, Mattan Lundquist, came about because I wanted Matilda's best friend to be called Matilda as well. Matilda Peppercorn's name is shortened to Tilly, and Matilda

Lundquist's name is shortened to Mattan because she's Swedish. Her surname was suggested by one of my Swedish friends as a popular Swedish surname.

Think about the character you want to establish. Characters who are your normal, everyday kind of boy or girl could have a normal, everyday type of name, which will convey instantly that they are an 'every man' kind of individual whom everyone can relate to. Larger-than-life characters can have larger-than-life, unusual names - G-Mamma, Hagrid, Artemis Fowl and so on.

If you want to start from scratch, an interesting exercise is to take a word that might indicate something evil, or pleasant, or smelly, or whatever you want to get across to your reader, and change just one or two letters in it.

SNAKE becomes **SNAPE**

MAGNIFICENCE becomes **MALIFICENCE**

Age and birthday:

Children like to read upwards a bit, as discussed, so the age of your character is important - if you're going to mention it. If you do plan to mention it, then make it at the top end of your age bracket or even very slightly above it. If you don't plan to mention it, then you'll need to make it a little clearer by where they are at school, what kind of hobbies they have and so on.

You don't have to know when your character's birthday is as it may not come up at all. If you're writing a series or a longer book that covers a reasonable period of time, then your character is going to have a birthday somewhere in there. Birthdays are hugely significant for children; they start counting the days to the next one practically as soon as the last one's over. If you're going to have a birthday, think about what the significance of it might be for your character. You'll know all about it yourself ...

Appearance:

As I've mentioned, you may or may not mention everything about the appearance of your character, but it might help for you to know it so that you can drip-feed it in for your reader. What you should avoid is a long list of attributes that reads like a police identification appearing in your book.

James was tall for his age of eleven, about one and half metres, and skinny too. He had brown hair that was cut short at the back but left long at the front, and his eyes were hazel. He had sunken cheeks and pale skin, and was a bit spotty. His hands were always grubby, and he chewed his lips because he was nervous.

Can you see the identification list appearing there? What people often do to get around this is have the character spot themselves in a mirror in the first chapter, often because they're getting out of bed, going to school, or going back to bed. You know the kind of thing:

James stared at his reflection in the mirror which hung at just 1m 50cm to match his height. A pair of hazel eyes rimmed by metal-framed spectacles gazed back at him. His brown hair was trimmed in a buzz cut with a long fringe; it made him look like a chewed tennis ball according to his mum. Now it flopped in his eyes and he brushed it away with his right hand, noticing as he did so that his fingernails were dirty again, and his knuckles black with grime. There were smudges of dirt on his pale, sallown, sunken cheeks, where a large spot was starting to form. The boy in the mirror looked like he'd had a bad day at school, with worried eyes and lips that were being eaten from the inside out ...

Actually that's not as bad, because I've written it by 'showing not telling' (of which more later). But if you were to land on that at your second paragraph, it may prove to be far too much detail to take in at one go. Far better for you to know all this information about your character, and let your reader share it little by little, on a 'need to know' basis. If your reader never needs to know that James has a spot and a floppy fringe, then keep it to yourself. If the reader does need to know that he has fingernails in which he could grow mustard and cress, then mention it as a piece of action - when he passes his friend a nice white-bread sandwich, for instance.

Family arrangement:

Many children's characters are orphans, or separated from their families in some way, and there's a reason for that - with too many adults in the way, they can't go off and have their adventures. It's often the case that the whole plotline is built around the child finding out something about their parents, or avenging their family's downfall, or dealing with something that happened to their family before their time.

Don't be afraid to kill off the parents - though possibly not during the book itself (depending on the type and age of book you're writing). And think about the impact that the child's placement in the family has on the story, and on their character development.

What makes them laugh and cry?

This question is just to make you delve a little deeper into your character's psyche. If they laugh at misery, what kind of laugh is it, and does it mean they're evil?

One of my best friends cries with laughter at anyone falling over and potentially hurting themselves, but she's the loveliest person ever. That form of what the Germans call 'Schadenfreude', or joy at things going wrong, is the backbone to a lot of slapstick comedy, and many people find it comical.

But some people are just plain mean. Think about what it means for your character specifically - does it show that they're nervous, kind, sorrowful, hardened by life? Are they unable to cry? All these little factors can demonstrate a certain type of personality.

What underwear do they have on?

Okay, this is just a bit of fun to help you focus in on the character again. It's all very easy to point out what they're wearing on top, but what underwear they have on can speak volumes

about someone. Here are some examples. Consider the obvious answer first, and then a not-so-obvious answer. What character would wear:

Navy blue knickers

Black boxers with a red dragon emblem

Long white bloomers

Pink frilly pants

Jockeys

Wayne Rooney undies

Pull-up nappies

See. I told you undies speak volumes. Just ask Captain Underpants, or Georgia Nicolson.

If you liked, you could use a ‘character two’ column to describe your character’s side-kick (their best friend, mentor, mad assistant). If they don’t have a side-kick, you could use it to describe their enemy. Or you could extend the grid out to describe your character’s two friends *and* their nemesis.

Go to town.

Build your entire cast to perform your plot, but do remember that you won’t need to develop all the characters to the same extent. If you do your story will become unwieldy, and you may well find yourself falling into difficulties with the narrative voice and working out who is telling the story. Concentrate on a few major protagonists, and only if they’re pivotal to the story.

Just some notes on the additional characters:

Numbers of characters:

You can have a lone soldier, or a pair of best buddies, or a trio of intrepid travellers. Beyond that, it starts to get a bit more complicated. Remember that odd numbers tend to work better than even

numbers. Just think of the Famous Five, the Secret Seven, and the triumvirate of Harry, Hermione and Ron.

Why do odd numbers work better? Because there is always the potential for conflict - for one outsider, for someone feeling left out. You can still have this with four, of course, but then it's much easier to divide evenly and then there's not so much anguish.

Adult characters:

Children like to read about other children, even if they're older 'children' of fourteen or fifteen. They like to recognise themselves in the characters (as we all do, no matter what age we are). Writers who are new to children's writing often find it terribly difficult to leave themselves out of it, and spend a lot of time incorporating adult characters into the main list of important people in the shape of Wise Dad, or Kind Nana, or Special Teacher.

Many of the most beloved adult characters in children's books are just big children. They are mostly innocent, bumbling, funny, endearing, unusually adventurous, dreamy and imaginative and so on, as you will recall if you think of many of the adult characters children love: Hagrid, Badjelly the Witch, the BFG, G-Mamma, Willy Wonka.

Alternatively, adult characters should be very grown up indeed. They might be all-knowing, or all-evil, or wise beyond measure. These adult characters are likely to be mentors, masters, teachers, often the enemy, and sometimes parents or care-givers.

The golden rule is that it's fine to make your adult character a very significant character, but usually only if they are very 'child-like' themselves, or they are a guide or mentor (or the enemy). Gimli, Gandalf and Saruman. Hagrid, Dumbledore and Voldemort. G-Mamma, Mrs Halliday and Copernicus. You see how they work.

Character development

Now that you have a good grasp of your hero's personality as your story begins, we're going to discuss what you will probably have heard of before as the character 'arc'. This just means how the character changes throughout the story, and it's very much the point at which character meets plot.

Remember all those challenges we established in your 'peaks of activity' during the plotting chapter? They will have had an impact on the character, for good or ill, and it is these interventions that cause the character to change and grow, to develop in some direction.

Depending on who your character is and what role they play, their development may take different trajectories, and this is often related to a change in status. The nasty teacher who starts out as all-powerful in the beginning - ie HIGH status - will have a reversal so that they end up as LOW status. Meanwhile the protagonist (your hero or heroine) will have had a similar reversal but in the opposite direction, from low status to high status.

Just think of Miss Trunchbull and Matilda herself in Roald Dahl's 'Matilda' - Matilda goes from lowly and unwanted to the star of the school, while the Trunchbull gets her come-uppance for her evil bullying and exploitation of her high status, to become utterly humiliated and low-status in the end.

Look at that name, too! Trunchbull ... what word did that come from? This is exactly how Roald Dahl used to create names and words too; in the museum dedicated to his work in Great Missenden, England, you can see lists of words scribbled on the yellow lined paper he favoured, as he conjured up all his characters and wonderful language.

Be aware that it's not always as dramatic change a change as being able to bring the teacher to their knees through the character's use of tele-kinesis. It may be subtle, but there is still the probability that some shift in status has occurred, even if it's only a rise in the character's self-awareness.

On the other hand, it may be a very dramatic change - from ordinary boy to wizard, from ordinary girl to super-spy, from ordinary children to kings and queens of a land through a wardrobe. The extent and type of development will depend on your book, your plot, and the kind of ending you want to present to your reader, but in most cases you will move your main character from lowly to powerful, and your baddy/enemy/antagonist from powerful to lowly.

Some of the changes may be less observable than others. If someone's become unafraid of public speaking, it's going to be quite evident from the way they hold themselves on stage, speaking confidently and loudly without deafening the audience with the knocking of their knees. If their development is that they've accepted, say, the death of their dad, then it could be much more subtle, shown simply in the way they take the rubbish out without being asked.

Whatever the scale of the change, it might help you to consider how those factors we looked at while building your character might have altered by the end of your book. Has the name changed? Bozo to Bigzo. Steely to Silver. Their influence on the family? The underwear they sport!

Excellent. Now you're getting a mental image of your character's arc or development throughout the whole story.

If you're a planner, you might even want to go back to your 'three little pigs' plotline, and just add in how each peak of activity will influence your hero's character development. You probably won't need to, however: just knowing so much about your characters and how they're going to change may well be enough to let you enable them to grow naturally throughout the telling of your tale.

Or they might take over and tell you exactly how they're going to develop themselves.

Again, remember that you don't have to take every single one of your characters through this kind of arc. You'll end up exhausting yourself and the reader. And you've all got to keep going to the very, very end, when the character reaches nirvana, beats the enemy, satisfies those fans

and readers ... Boy, it's tiring just *being* a character, never mind creating one - so make sure you don't tire yourself out with unnecessary conversions.

Now we know who's populating your story. In the next chapter, we'll discover who is telling your story. So there we have it. Wasn't that character building?

Go on, admit it. Sometimes it *is* good for us.

SOMETHING TO TRY

Build yourself a character grid, listing out some questions for your character in the left column. In the second column, write the answers for your character at the beginning of the book. In the third column, write the answers for your character at the end of the book.

Alternatively, write your hero's in the second column and your enemy's in the third.

Then take your character (or let another character take your character) up to the top of a tall building, and tell them to jump.

Summary

Your characters make up the ‘other half’ of your book, and are responsible for picking up that plot-line and taking it where it needs to go.

Characters sometimes create themselves and appear full-formed in your imagination, telling you exactly how to describe them to the reader. Other characters need to be created, built from the ground up.

Ways to create your character from scratch include jotting down notes about them, carrying out mock interviews with them, or filling in a character chart or grid. You can do this for one or several characters.

Once you’ve created your character, they are going to have to go on a journey, possibly one of self-discovery rather than an actual trip. Once they’ve reached the end of that journey (at the end of the book!) they will have changed to a greater or lesser degree. This is your character’s ‘arc’.

Chapter 7 Narrative Voice

In the last chapter, we discussed your characters, and this week we're going to elaborate on that by discussing who actually tells the story; in other words, what the narrative voice is. Each of your characters has a voice, and they are part of the narrative, so you might assume - not without good reason - that the narrative voice for your book comes from one or more of your characters. In a way it does, but actually, the narrative voice represents a different level of story-telling.

Nor is to be wholly confused with your author's voice, which is more about your natural style, although to a degree it is dependent up on this. Narrative voice is really about the way the story is conveyed to the reader.

It's a very complex matter in literary terms. Whole books are devoted to it and it is the subject of much debate and definition. However, as an author, I've found that you only need to understand what you're doing and why, without necessarily having a deep insight into the use of narrative voice in literature which leads to all sorts of complications like unreliable narrators and the like. You need to understand the effect it has on the reader, not literary critics around the world.

So it's important that you have a practical understanding of this issue of voice, and learn how to apply it appropriately ... but I am warning you now - even at this level, it's complicated. People often struggle to get their head around the concept, and even when they understand it in an academic sense, they're still not sure how it applies to their own writing.

However, it's often at the stage when they do apply it to their own writing that authors reach a huge moment of enlightenment. When they realise they've finally got the voice right. When, suddenly, the narrative begins to sing instead of mumble. You will make choices in this particular discipline of writing that can hit the mark exactly and make your story zing, or you can deaden the style in some way. You'll need to grasp this principle, experiment with this principle, and then make it your own. You'll be delighted by what transpires, I promise you, although it may feel like a slog along the way.

Bear with me, then, as we start to de-construct this technical issue of narrative voice, alongside of which sits the topic of the author's voice, and connected to which is the matter of tense. We'll break it down piece by piece and then you can put it back together again, firstly by reading and recognising it in other people's writing, and then by trialling it with your own work.

And then I'm sure that at least some of you will have a moment of illumination where the correct voice finds its way to you, or where you realise that you've been getting it right all along.

The common forms of narrative voice

You probably know two forms of narrative voice: first person and third person. First person is where the story is told from the point of view of 'I', and third person is where the point of view is 'he' or 'she'. Actually there are others, and I'll introduce you to them soon.

So far so good. As I said, you probably knew those voices. What the above paragraph does, however, is introduce a very important construct in 'narrative voice' and that is 'point of view'. Point of view (or POV, as it is often known) is much used in the film and TV worlds but is not so often connected with books and literature. Well, here's my writer's advice for you: start using it. A lot!

This little phrase will help you enormously to decide which voice you are in. More than that, it will identify whose *head* you are in. Whose *eyes* are we seeing this story through? Whose *ears* are listening to this conversation so that I, the reader, can hear it too? Whose language, moods, influences and opinions are we experiencing as we read the book?

Let's look at each of the narrative voice forms in terms of point of view. Or POV, if you will (it's just a lot easier to write).

First person

This one is perhaps the easiest to work out. The POV for the first person is ME. Well, not actually me as in Jill Marshall, but ME as in the main character of your book.

(Incidentally, this little bit of confusion of ME the character or ME the reader is why not many picture books are written in the first person - it gets complicated for the little recipient who is hearing the story).

So we are directly in the head of your main character, and learn about the whole of the story, the plot, the other characters, the main character's history (back story), the other characters' back story if the main character chooses to go into it ... and so on.

Common identifiers of the first person voice are 'I', 'me', 'my' and 'mine'. You will rarely see the main character use their own name; it will only be used by other people.

We are in the head of the main character who represents themselves as I. And we stay there.

Example A, First Person

I'd had enough of Budgers picking on me. It was time to do something about it. As long as I allowed her to get the better of me, I'd always be seen as a loser at school. And I was desperate to be Games Captain. Really desperate.

Later that night, I followed her through the shadows towards the gym. 'Budgers,' I called. 'You left something behind.'

Budgers sniggered. 'What, like you left your brain behind? It's pitch black, Fredericks, and there's nobody around but you and me.'

'Exactly,' I said.

Second person

There you are, I told you there were other forms of narrative voice besides first and third. Maybe you saw this coming, or maybe you didn't. Anyway, I have just given you (oops, did it again) several clues as to how you (Ah! Again!) can spot the use of the second person.

Let me just run that past you again.

There **you** are, I told **you** there were others. Maybe **you** saw this coming, or maybe **you** didn't. Anyway, I have just given **you** (**oops, did it again**) several clues as to how **you** (**Agh! Again!**) can spot the use of the second person.

The second person, then, is where the author (me, Jill Marshall, your facilitator) talks directly to you (the reader, client, student of writing children's books). Every one of these chapters is written in the second person, because I'm communicating directly with you. As you can probably guess from this, the most common place to see the second person in use is in instructional books, teacher/student manuals, even self-help books - anywhere where the writer is imparting information directly to the person reading the book.

However, it does pop up from time to time in children's books. Can you think where? See, I just did it again. It's in those little questions that the author drops into the text to converse directly with the reader. And what do you think happened next, reader? Can you imagine what poor Eunice felt? Are you clever like Jane so you can count all the way up to ten?

You know the kind of thing. They are probably more common in picture books for the under-fives (and that's because we're more likely to be *teaching* someone in an under-five book rather than purely entertaining them), but they do appear in some children's books like *The Tale of Desperaux* by Kate di Camillo.

Sometimes the second voice shows up in the form of footnotes, where the author suddenly intervenes to explain a word or a fact or a snippet of back story. This the case in the Lemony Snicket series, where Lemony himself (an unreliable narrator, but let's not go into that) will write a long complex word that might be outside the reader's usual vocabulary, and then either put its meaning in brackets beside it or will direct the reader to the bottom of the page to read a footnote. Footnotes proliferate in the Jonathan Stroud books, *The Bartameus Trilogy*, where readers are often asked to leave what they're reading and check out some factoid below. There's nothing technically wrong with using the second person in this way. What it does to me as a reader, however, is:

It distracts me from the story, and remind me that I'm reading a book that somebody wrote (and here they, are shouting at me!). I'd much rather be immersed in the story to the extent that the writing and therefore the writer become completely invisible. I'm not the only one with this view, either. When I was reading a book to my daughter when she was about seven, after the fourth 'Dear Reader' interruption from the author she wrenched it out of my hands, yelling, 'Why does she keep doing that!' It's a beautiful, award-winning book, and extremely interesting from the point of view of point of view and narrative voice, if you follow my drift. But that second person device is not for everyone.

It makes me feel a little patronised. I imagine that's what my daughter experienced when the author was at pains to make sure she understood exactly what was going on. 'I get it already!' was more or less what her 'dear reader' in the form of my seven year old was telling her. Of course, I am now aware of the irony of the fact that the whole of this book is written in the second person, so if you've felt patronised at any point on the course, I apologise sincerely.

It seems rather old-fashioned. I can forgive Jane Austen completely for speaking directly to me in this fashion. She's my brilliant, witty friend. Moreover, she was writing two hundred years ago. These days, it feels rather out-of-place and anachronistic (*that means not belonging time-wise or in the wrong era, readers ... oh my lord, it's catching*).

As you'll probably have gathered, other than for teaching purposes, I am not a great fan of the second person. However, cleverly used, it could give your book exactly the style and feel you want for it. The real author of Lemony Snicket used it for precisely that reason to create a sumptuous collection of dark, gothic novels. The Tale of Desperaux is a sweet, old-fashioned type of tale, so perhaps it works there too.

My advice for you, then, is to know why you're using it if you choose to do so, and use it sparingly.

Example B, second person

I'd had enough of Budgers picking on me. It was time to do something about it. As long as I allowed her to get the better of me, I'd always be seen as a loser at school. And I was desperate to be Games Captain. Really desperate.

(Gosh, Reader, can you hear how sad poor Fredericks is?)

Later that night, I followed her through the shadows towards the gym (abbreviated version of Gymnasium, otherwise known as Sports Hall). 'Budgers,' I called. 'You left something behind.'

Budgers sniggered. 'What, like you left your brain behind? It's pitch black, Fredericks, and there's nobody around but you and me.'

Oh, reader! Is Fredericks going to be okay?

'Exactly,' I said.

Third person

The third person, as I'm sure you knew already, is still in the point of view of the main character as with the first person, but using 'he' or 'she' rather than 'I'. What you might not know, however, is that the third person can be divided into two different voice forms - third person *limited*, and third person *unlimited*. It is this distinction which causes the majority of the problems I see in the manuscripts I assess. Writers have generally known they're using the third person, and they've used it consistently throughout, but they may not have realised that they have unwittingly slipped from a third person limited voice to a third person Unlimited voice.

Let me explain.

Third Person Limited

This is fairly self-evident, really, so forgive me for stating the obvious: in the third person limited, we are limited to one person's view-point, and that person is a 'he' or a 'she'. That means that we are always in the head of that one person only. We only ever see the story through their eyes, using 'he' or 'she'. If they are not present at the event, if they don't hear or join in a conversation, if they don't experience it first-hand ... then we, the reader, do not know about it.

That doesn't mean that we can't understand the other characters too. Obviously we'll get some insight into what their personalities are like, what they're up to in plot terms - but only, absolutely only if the main character that you've chosen to tell the story is there too.

This is a lot more difficult to grasp than many people realise, so I find the easiest way to demonstrate what I mean is through the Harry Potter books (and I mean the books, not the films). The main character, clearly, is Harry Potter.

It is entirely Harry's story.

We know that Hermione and Ron are critical characters, as are many of the cast of thousands, but apart from the opening chapters in a few of the books (where we might find ourselves in Snape's house, or the office of the British Prime Minister), we only ever know what's going on in the story if Harry is there. Yes, we know that Hermione's clever and will quite often disappear to the library to unearth some legend and solve a mystery or two, but we don't follow her into the library unless Harry follows her too. We're all aware that Ron lives in a tumble-down house with many other red-haired children, but we never, ever go there unless Harry is going there too. If Harry's not present, or it isn't reported back to him after the fact, then it just doesn't happen.

The Harry Potter books are examples of a straight third person narrative (if we ignore one or two opening chapters). The third person limited voice, in the past tense, is the most common narrative voice for children's books up to about ten or eleven years old.

There are variations, naturally, but if you think of it as the classic storytelling voice, you'll recognise it instantly as the easiest way to read a story aloud. There's no confusion for the reader, and the narration of the story is tight and disciplined. It can be used without issue from age 0 to 100, so if that's the only voice you ever choose to use, you won't go far wrong.

The whole Jane Blonde series is in the third person limited - every single element of it is seen through Janey's eyes. You have to be very exacting about it, and remain consistently inside that character's head. Look through their eyes only. Listen through their ears only. Share their

feelings more intimately than anyone else's, even if the reader can be aware of someone else's emotions too - if your character is aware too.

If you really want to get inside the head of one of the other characters, you can have more third person narratives. I do this myself in the Jack BC books. One third person narrator is Jack Bootle Cadogan, and the other is Albie Cornthwaite. You might use three, although you do stand the risk of getting the voices and your reader mixed up and confused. I wouldn't suggest using any more than three - as we discovered in the plotting chapter, threes work well in writing terms, and any more can lose impact.

The trick to using multiple third person narrative voices is to keep each one to distinct sections. In Jack BC and the Curse of Anubis, for example, I have a chapter of Albie, then a chapter or two or sometimes three of Jack (who is the main character), then another chapter of Albie. You can do it chapter on, chapter off, if you like. If you really have to change voice within a chapter (and honestly, I've found very, very few examples where it's really necessary) then keep all one character's observations and activities strictly within one section, and then keep all the other character's observations and activities strictly within another section.

Try to avoid having to go back and forth between sections, too; this gets exhausting for the reader, and again, it's probably very unlikely that we really need to know what's going on in the head of each of those characters. You may just have been afraid to commit!

Example C, third person limited

He'd had enough of Budgers picking on him. It was time to do something about it. As long as he allowed her to get the better of him, he'd always be seen as a loser at school. And he was desperate to be Games Captain. Really desperate.

Later that night, he followed her through the shadows towards the gym. 'Budgers,' he called. 'You left something behind.'

Budgers sniggered. 'What, like you left your brain behind? It's pitch black, Fredericks, and there's nobody around but you and me.'

'Exactly,' said Fredericks.

Third person unlimited

We talked in the third person limited about the importance of confining your third person limited voice to one section - a succinct and separate part of a chapter, if not a whole chapter, or even a section of a book like PART I. The third person unlimited is what happens when you don't keep your different voices discreetly within a section.

The third person unlimited means that we can zip into anyone's head and see the story from their perspective, or their neighbour's, or the cat's, and so it goes on ... This is why the third person unlimited voice at its most extreme is sometimes known as the Omniscient viewpoint, and sometimes even the 'God' voice. It's as if the narrator is sitting up in the heavens, looking down on a landscape populated with many characters, and at any point they can jump from one character into the head of another, irrespective of distance or obstacles. The narrator is god of their universe, all-powerful, all-seeing - omniscient.

There are some upsides to this, in that the reader can more intimately understand any character's thoughts. If done deliberately and properly it can be very effective as a narrative device. However, it's rare that it's done deliberately, and in general the disadvantages of the third person unlimited far outweigh the advantages:

It's old-fashioned again. Dickens was fairly fond of writing in this way, but then he was effectively writing Victorian soap operas and serialising them week by week, so it's hardly surprising if we view it that way that the reader was given insights into many different characters. Coronation Street wouldn't be much fun either (for those who think it is!) if we only ever followed one character throughout. Mostly, however, the third person unlimited comes across as laboured and at times archaic.

It makes it difficult for the reader to form a close association with any character. You may find they build alliances with the wrong ones! What's more likely, though, is that they won't

empathise with any character especially well, and we know that readers like to relate to a character or aspire to follow in their shoes. If they don't, they'll lose interest in the story. Then the book. And then you the author, because they'll just assume that they don't like your style.

It makes it very long. We all know the Harry Potter books are long already; imagine how much longer they'd be if we followed Ron, Hermione, Dumbledore, Hagrid, Malfoy, Malfoy Senior, Snape, Voldemort and so on every time they disappeared off the page for a moment or two.

More often than not, the third person unlimited is NOT used deliberately, so the pattern the reader is trying to follow becomes ever more random. While the reader's just getting used to one person, the author decides to explain how the second character came to have popcorn in his ear, and suddenly, like a time-traveller, the reader has to swap bodies and try and gain some insight into this new person. Then - WHAM - we're back with the first character, and then hey, there's a third!

The reader doesn't actually need to know anything other than what the main character is undergoing, but they're being forced to understand strange disassociated facts about the other personalities too. And because it isn't being done deliberately, the reader picks up on the uncertainty and starts to feel very uncomfortable about this reading experience. What's going on here? Why do I need to know that? What happened to ... (flick back several pages) ... Justin or whatever his name was?

Then, guess what - they give up.

It will start to look like this:

Example D, third person unlimited

He'd had enough of Budgers picking on him. It was time to do something about it. As long as he allowed her to get the better of him, he'd always be seen as a loser at school. And he was desperate to be Games Captain. Really desperate. Like Graham; he'd been a really great games captain.

Graham didn't think he was though. As he watched Fredericks playing in the distance, he thought about all the times he'd stuffed up. Why hadn't he stuck to ice hockey, as a player instead of a captain? That way, Jenny would still have wanted to date him. Instead he never saw her because he was arranging all the stupid tables and leagues for everyone else.

Later that night, Fredericks followed Budgers through the shadows towards the gym. 'Budgers,' he called. 'You left something behind.'

Budgers sniggered. That idiot, Fredericks. She really enjoyed making him look like an idiot - bossed around and bullied by a girl. He wasn't to know that she had an awful time at home, with her dad being a bit too fond of the whiskey, and then a bit too fond of smashing up the furniture. And she didn't want him to know. She didn't need anyone to know about what went on when nobody was watching.

'What, like you left your brain behind?' she said, rubbing her hands together with glee. She was going to get him. Totally GET him. 'It's pitch black, Fredericks, and there's nobody around but you and me.'

'Exactly,' said Fredericks. Ha! He'd got her! She had no idea that he was going to turn the tables on her, that he'd been learning ju-jitsu for the last five months just in case this moment ever arose.

Neither of them realised that Graham was watching, and that behind him, the caretaker had started taking a keen interest in what was going on. The caretaker had been having a bad day - told off by the principal for leaving flammable rubbish in the bins. As if that was his problem. The kids were out of control. Way out of control.

As you might imagine from this, we don't often see the third person unlimited used these days, particularly in children's books. There are instances of it in *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne (although I still think it's debatable whether that's a children's book). If you read through, you'll find the thought process jumping from Bruno's head to that of Gretel, his sister's.

Some time back I mentioned that once you know the rules, you can break them - my feeling is that this is one of those occasions. In fact, as a children's book, *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* breaks many rules! However, as a contemporary example of the third person unlimited (and a very good book to de-construct as a children's writer) then it is well worth a read.

Tense

Now that we're starting to get a handle on narrative voice, this seems like a good time to introduce the issue of tense - a very good time indeed, as tense is all to do with time, and whether something is happening now, or happening in the past.

The tenses we usually use are present or past. There are other more complex permutations in grammatical terms, but we'll just stick to those two.

Present is happening now, and can be identified with endings of 'e', 'ings' and 's' if you're looking for an easy way to spot it:

Eg 1

I am going to the counter when I notice the shop assistant reeks of perfume. I know that perfume - it's the one my aunt wears.

Eg 2

He steps out into the road just as the car screeches to a halt. For a moment he thinks it's too late, and he almost hops out of the way. But then he remembers his new powers, and before he can think too hard about it, he pushes down onto the balls of his feet and takes off, bouncing up and over the car.

Past tense happened in the past, and is identified by 'd' or 'ed' endings.

Eg 3

I was going to the counter when I noticed the shop assistant reeked of perfume. I knew that perfume - it was the one my aunt wore.

Eg 4

He stepped out into the road just as the car screeched to a halt. For a moment he thought it was too late, and he almost hopped out of the way. But then he remembered his new powers, and before he could think too hard about it, he pushed down onto the balls of his feet and takes off, bouncing up and over the car.

Right. Now I'd like you to go back over these few examples, and read each one of them aloud. Reading aloud can make a real difference to how it feels, and your sense of atmosphere. That way you'll start to be able to gauge that physical reaction I told you about in the early chapters. One will sound completely right, while another might change the age of the reader, turn the tone and style of it into something else (which you may even find you prefer! That's okay - go with your gut.

So read them aloud, and then answer the following questions:

Which combination sounded better for the first person - ie examples 1 and 3? Eg 1 is first person present tense, and eg 3 is first person past tense. Why do you think it sounded better?

Which combination sounded better for third person, ie examples 2 and 4? Eg 2 is third person present tense, and eg 3 is third person past tense. Why do you think it sounded better?

While there are no hard and fast rules for this, the general findings are that first person and present tense can work really well as a combination. It has a rawness, a certain immediacy that can lend itself well to a stream of consciousness, diary-type book that delves into people's feelings.

Third person and past tense also works well, as it has a traditional, solid foundation that many readers are used to and can be applied really well to adventures, quests, mysteries, and more action-based books. But as mentioned, any combination can be used to great effect.

These are recommendations only, of course. Once you know all the rules, you may break them! For Kave-Tina Rox, for instance, although it was a picture book and should probably have been

in third person past tense for that reason, I decided my character could pull it off and gave it a 'first person present tense' narrative instead.

In my new series, Matilda Peppercorn, I use the first person with the past tense, as she's a lovely mad girl whose thoughts are fun to hear, but it's very adventuresome with a traditional 'story' structure (rather than, say, a diary or journal) so the past tense works with that element of it.

Both of Jack BC's third person limited narrators are combined with the past tense, because that seemed to work for their characters; Jane Blonde has a classic third person past tense voice. For all of these, I did a lot - and I mean a LOT - of experimenting and reading aloud to make sure it was all gelling together and making the hairs on my arms stand on end. Yes, really.

Author's voice

So this is where the next stage comes in. Not only do you have to identify the various narrative voices depending on whose point of view it is in, and then have to add in the additional factor of which tense to combine it with, but you also have to work out what your authentic author's voice is.

By this, I don't mean the author's commentary which pokes through at the reader when you use the second voice, but the style in which you are most comfortable, in which your authentic voice comes through.

Many, many new writers of my acquaintance start out thinking they want to write picture books, but actually their authentic voice is for 9 - 11 year olds. Or people wanting to write YA find they actually write fantastic fiction for 7 - 9s. Sometimes it's dictated by how old that writer's children are. Sometimes.

Often I think people believe this is the case, and they try to compartmentalise their talents so they can write for their offspring. You suddenly remember you could write once in your life, and now you have this willing audience, so let's put the two together and make stories!

To my mind, that's too simplistic. You were a writer before you had children. Remember? You used to write when you were a kid, didn't you? Pages and pages of the stuff when you were a teenager. Heaps of stories when you were seven, eight and nine. Several beginnings of novels when you hit your early twenties ...

Okay, so this might not be your exact scenario, but usually it's something of this kind. In my case, as I've said, many people assume that I wrote Jane Blonde for my daughter. However, my daughter was two when I first thought of Jane Blonde, and four or so when I first started writing about Jane Blonde, and still younger than Jane Blonde herself when the first book was published. Now she's in her late teens.

Apart from the inspiration of her hair colour, the Jane Blonde series was never written because of my daughter. It was written for me, at exactly the age I was when you could not tear me away from a good book, or even a bad book; when reading was what I lived for; when I forced my poor mother to trail for miles up and down to the library, hauling a shopping trolley stuffed with books to feed my addiction.

And how old was I then? About ten. Between nine and eleven years old. Right in the middle of that 8 - 12 age bracket that Jane Blonde is known to reside in. When Jane Blonde came along, I wrote her for the Me that would have loved her.

Have another glance back at some of the pieces you've written since you started reading this book. Which POV are they in? What tense are they in? Which sounds most authentic: right for the age, which might mean right for you at that age. Read them aloud, please.

Brilliant. Now you're well on the way to establishing a voice which works for you as well as working for the book. And finally, some tips for making sure you get your narrative voice and tense as right as right can be:

Choose one, and stick to it. One voice and stick to it, one tense and stick to it. Unless you alter it by moving into a new section, which should probably be a new chapter if you can manage

it. Until you are a very practiced writer, don't try playing with the form as it will make your writing seem less experienced rather than more.

Find your style, and work with it. Even if you've always wanted to write for seven year olds, if your authentic voice is actually for fourteen year olds, then go with it. Your writing will be much the better for it, and both you and your readers will enjoy the experience more. When you've mastered all that needs to be known about narrative voice and tense for fourteen year olds, then you can adapt your style for seven year olds - which could mean going from first person present tense to third person past tense. But you knew that. There I go, getting all Second Person on you again.

Don't worry about dialogue. You might feel when you're getting into dialogue that you were writing in the third person past tense and now you're suddenly in the first person and the present tense. Don't over-think it. It's like rock bands on tour - what happens between the speech marks stays between the speech marks. It's only the 'he said's' and 'I says' that matter.

If you're still not convinced, read through examples A - D in this chapter about Budgers and Fredericks. The words between the speech marks never change, no matter what voice or tense you are in. Just the 'he said's' and the 'I says'.

Wow, I've made you earn your stripes in this chapter! Still, it really is a sign of growing maturity as a writer, to be able to understand and select your narrative voice and tense, and stick to them appropriately.

Masel tov.

SOMETHING TO TRY

What I'd love you to do is to go back to an earlier piece of writing - perhaps one of your what if beginnings, or your character falling off a building.

Analyse it to identify the voice and tense. Is it first person, past tense? Third person limited, present tense? Third person unlimited?

Whichever it is, write the piece again but this time, change both of those elements. For example, if it's first person, past tense, rewrite it as third person, present tense.

Then read both aloud and prepare for an epiphany. One version will undoubtedly sound very different to the other. You'll prefer one over the other. It will make you feel differently. It might even make the hairs stand up on your arms.

Go back to another piece of writing, and do the same again. Have fun.

Summary

Narrative voice is the device by which the story is conveyed to the reader, and is defined by whose point of view we see the story through. It is one of the most powerful techniques to employ to enhance your story.

While there are two commonly known forms of narrative voice - first person and third person - there is also a second person voice, and the third person voice is divided into two different voices.

The third person can be either limited (only seen through one person's eyes) or unlimited (seen through the POV of many different characters). The unlimited third person voice is sometimes known as the omniscient or God voice.

The topic of tense is also commonly connected with voice, and some more standard combinations are third person limited and past tense, and first person and present tense. Any combination can be used as long as it's used consistently.

The most common mistake new writers use is changing POV in the middle of a sentence, section or chapter. If you have to change, do it by opening a new section, or better yet, a new chapter.

Chapter 8 It's Show Time, Folks!

In the last chapter, I introduced you to the rather chunky and technical issue of narrative voice. Now that your book's taking shape, it's all these matters of technique in writing that will begin to make your manuscript ring true and shine through.

When I'm assessing a manuscript, I can quickly see how practiced and experienced someone is at writing - and therefore how much closer to publication, if that's what they're aiming for - by how much they have mastered this technical side of the craft.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the topic that we're about to discuss in this chapter. Besides authors and film-makers, not many people are even aware of the existence of this particular discipline, and that's either because the writer got it right in the first place, or any transgressions have been edited out of the finished article. Done properly, this technique allows your writing to become invisible, to sink into the background so that your reader is only aware of the story unfolding and the characters journeying.

This technique is known as 'show not tell'. You 'show' your story to the reader so that they can experience it for themselves, rather than telling them what's happened as if you're reporting it after the fact like a police report or piece of journalism. You involve the reader to the extent that you have to describe very little in order for them to know exactly what's going on, and precisely how your character is feeling (which will be the way your reader is feeling too). You guide their senses gently and appropriately, without troweling on mounds of information about what should be assaulting their ears, noses, hearts, feet ...

As with narrative voice, the best way to become familiar with what is showing rather than telling is to learn to recognise it on the page. This is made rather difficult by the fact that, as mentioned above, most published books have been edited so that all we see is what's 'shown'. To that end, I'll take you through some examples so that you can identify telling and showing for yourself, and then can go back and recognise it in your own work.

Here's an example of an incident that is 'told' rather than shown.

Benny sat nervously in Reception. He had gone along to the principal's office at 11.30am as the teacher had instructed him. At first he couldn't see the principal, but then he'd been told by the secretary that the head-teacher was on his way and that Benny should just sit still and behave himself. She said that she didn't imagine he knew how, but then she got on with some filing and left Benny alone.

The principal, who was called Mr Peters, had arrived about five minutes late, and then had shown Benny into his office. After making him sit on the hardest chair in the room, which Benny found uncomfortable because of his thin legs, Mr Peters read out a long list of wrongdoings that Benny had carried out that morning.

The list included the fact that he'd been late for the third time that week, and then he'd forgotten to take the register to the office and had put it in his backpack instead, and then he'd given George one of his peanut butter sandwiches and caused the other boy to swell up on account of his peanut allergy.

Benny tried to explain that he'd been late because he was putting a baby bird back into its nest, and that he hadn't forgotten to take the register but was going to suggest a new way of taking it which would involve doing it by computer. Then he tried telling Mr Peters that he didn't have peanut butter on his sandwiches. Instead it was almond butter and he shouted very loudly at the head-teacher that almonds didn't often cause allergies!

Mr Peters said he was very unhappy with Benny. Benny felt silly for shouting at him but it had been a very bad day for him too. Mr Peters had sighed, then sent Benny outside to wait for his father to arrive. Even though he was extremely terrified at what his father would do to him, as his father was always very strict, Benny had made himself sit in Reception instead of running off like he'd wanted to.

Indicators of 'telling'

To the trained eye, there are a number of pieces of evidence that instantly suggest 'telling' rather than showing in this piece of writing.

Dense text

This is just a quick visual test. When the text is very heavy on the page and there isn't much visible white space, it's often a sign that there's a big chunk of 'telling' going on. It's not always true, of course, and sometimes you *will* need to 'tell' some of your story, but if much of your writing looks like this at first glance, then the chances are you need to 'show' at least some of it.

After the fact

All of Benny's activities are being reported *after they've happened*. This is what makes it look like journalism rather than fiction. You can see it in the overuse of the past tense, and the fact that there is little or no detail in any of the events.

In fact, when I'm coaching journalists in the process of writing fiction, they often have difficulty in expanding their wordcount - what I call 'writing long'. They are trained to cut back words at all time, to focus only on the relevant, editing as much as they create. You still need careful editing, of course, but the joy of fiction is the way the words create new worlds for the reader, and it's hard to do that with a reporting style.

What I often write on manuscripts where this has occurred is 'Put it on the page', or sometimes 'I would have liked to have seen this!'. By this I mean put it down as it's happening, rather than telling the reader about it after it's all gone by. There are several events in this excerpt - lateness, the lost register, ballooning George, headmaster's office and so on - and we learn about them all well after they have occurred. Put it on the page for all to see, and you will suddenly find yourself 'writing long'. This particular piece could easily be a few pages, if not a whole chapter.

Reported speech

There is no dialogue in this piece of writing, even though we know that people have been communicating verbally. How do we know this? Because we are *told*. The author even uses the

word 'told' on several occasions to indicate that the speech is reported rather than direct dialogue.

Take another look at the first couple of paragraphs; I've highlighted the reported speech for you.

*Benny sat nervously in Reception. He had gone along to the principal's office at 11.30am as **the teacher had instructed him**. At first he couldn't see the principal, but then **he'd been told by the secretary that the head-teacher was on his way and that Benny should just sit still and behave himself**. She said that she didn't imagine he knew how, but then she got on with some filing and left Benny alone.*

*The principal, who was called Mr Peters, had arrived about five minutes late, and then had shown Benny into his office. After making him sit on the hardest chair in the room, which Benny found uncomfortable because of his thin legs, **Mr Peters read out a long list of wrong-doings that Benny had carried out that morning**.*

While there's nothing technically wrong with reported speech and it is fine to use it from time to time, I hope you can see that the effect here is to deaden the conversation and make the whole episode much flatter.

Over-explanation

Because we're not sharing in Benny's experiences, the author has to tell the reader how he's feeling and what he's thinking, and this often leads to over-egging the explanation: Benny sat nervously ... felt silly ... was uncomfortable because of his thin legs. None of these is incorrect, but there would be better ways to say them so that the reader knows without being told how Benny is feeling.

There's also a tendency to over-write by using adverbs where none are necessary, and exclamation marks and the like where none are needed, for example, in the sentence:

Instead it was almond butter and he shouted very loudly at the head-teacher that almonds didn't often cause allergies!

There's really no way to shout other than loudly, so that adverb is redundant, and the exclamation mark would be unnecessary if this was 'shown' in dialogue instead of reported speech.

So there we have it: a few instant alarm bells for a piece of writing which is telling rather than showing. It's not all that bad as a bit of story-telling goes, and there's not a single thing in it that's actually incorrect, but it could be so much better.

And that 'so much better' is what you're aiming for to really polish up your writing and entice those readers (and publishers).

This is just the beginning, then - learning how to spot a sneaky instance of 'telling' not 'showing'. What would now be helpful would be to discover what to do about it - how to turn it around so it's more show than tell.

I suggested earlier that a first indication of 'telling' could be the fact that the text looks dense. In other words, it's heavy. When you show rather than tell, you are making the text lighter. The story bounces like a helium-filled balloon, the conversation trips along, and the effect on the page is to penetrate that dark, heavy text and add some levity to the proceedings. Note that this does not mean you need to make it humorous, although that might be one of the results if you would like that. You are just making it easier to read, and for the reader to be in the story themselves rather than hearing it second-hand.

I have a mnemonic that I use to remember how to keep our writing light and fresh, like the meal it represents - SALAD. As if I were indeed assembling a salad, I'll take each ingredient one by one, then we'll apply it to our Benny example so that you can see it working in practice.

Salad

The first ‘S’ is for ... SUBTLETY

This relates to the tendency to over-describe, or what Monty Python might have referred to as ‘stating the bleeding obvious.’ Use concrete images that evoke powerful memories for the reader by all means, but use senses other than sight, emotions other than the immediate, and do it all without ever saying what you’re talking about – so not:

He was disappointed with his inappropriate birthday presents from Gran.

but rather

The sickly scent of vanilla seeping through the wrapping paper turned his stomach. Whoever thought bath salts were a good present for a nine year old boy? Gran, that was who.

Can you see the difference here? For a start, it’s visually different - it’s longer, with three sentences where previously one had sufficed. Then there is no statement of his feelings; rather than a bald indication of his disappointment, we share the experience of the physical reaction that the smell of the bath salts has on him. Furthermore, we can almost see him opening the present and trying not to reel with repulsion, whereas in the first example the opening of the presents could have happened at any time in the recent past.

The requirement for subtlety extends to the use of adverbs and too many adjectives. In school, children are often taught to find three beautiful words to describe a flower, a butterfly, the weather ...

In book-writing, however, the opposite is true. Less is definitely more. You don’t have to pare your language back to the degree that there’s not a single descriptive word in the whole manuscript, but keep the flowery on the down-low. This is especially true of adverbs (shouting loudly is back to ‘stating the bleeding obvious’, as is running quickly, crawling slowly, jumping bouncily and so on).

It's even more important for words used in dialogue to substitute for 'said'. Nothing signals 'NEW WRITER HERE' more than someone who constantly checks the thesaurus for new ways to say 'asked', 'said' and 'replied'. You could just use 'said' in all instances, in fact, so please do avoid the temptation to use any of the following more than once in any book: he postulated, she queried, he questioned, she parried, I countered, he reprimanded, he summarized (this isn't even a word, but I see it often!).

Let's take a look at a section of the Benny story that isn't particularly subtle.

Mr Peters said he was very unhappy with Benny. Benny felt silly for shouting at him but it had been a very bad day for him too. Mr Peters had sighed, then sent Benny outside to wait for his father to arrive. Even though he was extremely terrified at what his father would do to him, as his father was always very strict, Benny had made himself sit in Reception instead of running off like he'd wanted to.

First of all, what are the elements that state the obvious, or lack subtlety?

Here are some that I've pulled out:

There are several instances of the reader being told how someone is feeling, including Benny and the principal;

'Terrified' is already an extreme emotion - it doesn't need the additional 'extremely';

The fact that his father is always very strict is mentioned as a sort of after-thought. What examples do we have? How could we, the reader, share that terror?

Here's how I might have re-written it:

Benny's cheeks burned as Mr Peters closed the door on him with a shake of his balding head. Alone in the draughty reception area, he wondered just how much worse this day could get.

Then he remembered.

So much worse.

His backside had hardly recovered from the last beating his father had given him, and that was just for failing to put the rubbish out "properly". He wouldn't be able to sit for a week when Dad heard about his latest escapades.

Grabbing his knees to stop them from shaking, Benny watched the clock. Five minutes to his doom. Three minutes. One.

sAlad

The first 'A' in SALAD stands for ... Action on the page

A is for action, which means making your verbs active rather than passive to make your language more powerful (so rather than 'She **was pushed** to the end of the gangplank by Pirate Pat' you would say 'Pirate Pat **pushed her** to the end of the gangplank). Then make your active verbs even more action-oriented (eg 'Pirate Pat shoved/forced/cattle-prodded her to the end of the gangplank). Just read these two aloud and hear how much more action and urgency there is in the second version:

She was pushed to the end of the gangplank by Pirate Pat.

Pirate Pat shoved her to the end of the gangplank.

Without going into too much high school grammar, you basically need Subject, Verb, Object in that order if you can manage it. That means the person (Pirate Pat) followed by the verb (shoved) followed by the object (gangplank). If it's not that way round, then it's probably passive, as in the first example here which is verb (pushed) followed by object (gangplank) followed by subject (Pat).

Then, not only do your verbs need to be active not passive, and action-oriented not ordinary, but the action has to be there on the page for the reader to see. As I mentioned before, put it on the page as it's happening, rather than commenting on it afterwards.

Here's a section of Benny's story that relates the events after they've happened.

Benny tried to explain that he'd been late because he was putting a baby bird back into its nest, and that he hadn't forgotten to take the register but was going to suggest a new way of taking it which would involve doing it by computer. Then he tried telling Mr Peters that he didn't have peanut butter on his sandwiches. Instead it was almond butter and he shouted very loudly at the head-teacher that almonds didn't often cause allergies!

As you can see, there are three different events collapsed into this one small paragraph. What a shame, when they all sound quite exciting! In fact, each one gets more exciting than the last, rather like our three little pigs plotting technique. It would be far more fun for the reader to travel along with Benny while he rescues birds, invents new ways to take the roll-call in the morning, and accidentally causes his friend's head to swell up.

The morning began uneventfully enough. Breakfast - Weetbix. Dishwasher - locked and loaded. Backpack - packed on back. Benny set off for school, organised and feeling just a little smug that he was going to be On Time for once.

He scuffed along the street, kicking stones into the gutter, considering his grand plan for computerisation of the school roll-call. He'd win the Science Fair, possibly even the national finals ...

Benny was just lining up a crack gutter-shot when the pebble near his toe twitched.

'No way.' Dropping to his knees, Benny sized up the small grey mass. A tiny black eye gazed back at him. It was the tiniest baby bird Benny had ever seen with feathers. How it had survived so far he had no idea, but it was definitely not going to be his fault if the poor thing carked it now.

The nest took some time to locate, and Benny wasn't even sure he'd found the right one. He popped the baby bird into it anyway. 'Cuckoos are always doing this,' he said to the bird in what he hoped was a bird-like reassuring tone. 'You'll be fine.'

The black eye blinked back at him as Benny launched himself out of the tree. Darn. That was the school bell. Picking up the pace, Benny set off at a trot, skidding into the classroom just as Miss Masterton called out the last name on the class roll. She stared at Benny, then shook her head. 'Okay, Burton. Black mark for absence, and you can take the register to the office and explain to the school secretary.'

'Right,' said Benny with a sigh. Then, 'Right!' he said more cheerfully.

This was the perfect opportunity. He could substitute his computer programme for the morning's roll-call, and WOW the school secretary with it. Then she'd sell it on to all the teachers and the head for him. Job done, Science Fair won. He tucked the book in carefully beside his illegal lap-top, and settled in besides George for maths extension class.

Maths always took it out of George. At morning tea, he lay panting on the tarmac, like Bear Grills after a mountain mission. 'Water ... give me water,' he gasped. Benny handed over his flask, even though it had orange juice in it, and added a sandwich for good measure.

George tore at the soggy bread as if he'd been starving in the Serengeti. 'More!' he said, practically swallowing the thing whole. Then he turned to Benny in surprise. 'Ny hong,' he said, pointing at his mouth.

George's tongue was swelling like a snake that had just swallowed a rabbit, and both cheeks had turned scarlet. He held up the sandwich crust accusingly. 'Ea nut?' he said.

'No, almond,' said Benny. 'Honestly, it's almond. People don't get allergies to almonds.'

Then George screamed something at him which Benny translated as, 'I think I do, you moron,' at just the same moment that his friend keeled over and hit the tarmac all over again. Only this time, George appeared to be unconscious.

Just by putting the action on the page, we've immediately expanded the story, taking each incident and turning it into a 'scene' rather than a related event. This has the obvious effect of making the story longer, but it also takes the reader by the hand and leads them along in Benny's footsteps. Without having to 'tell' the reader anything, we know that Benny gets himself up in the morning, that he's often late, that he has mad ideas, that he's kind to injured animals, that

he's good at maths, that he wants to win the Science Fair for some reason, that his best friend is George, that George is allergic to peanuts and so on. The reader should be receiving a far more satisfying experience, sharing all Benny's discoveries and dreadful shocks with him directly instead of being removed from the action by the author intervening and 'telling' the story.

saLad.

The L in SALAD is for ... layering

We discussed the need to layer in information in the chapter on character, because it's often with the introduction of a character that we suddenly find ourselves wading through a boggy patch of telling. A new character pops up on the page, followed by several more pages of minutiae about the individual. It's better to feed in the details by introducing nuggets of information at relevant points throughout the whole of the story, instead of dishing it all up at the beginning.

Subtle layering assists you with your plotting as well, as it can often lead to a marvelous exposition or 'aha' moment at the climax of the book when the reader discovers what that tiny piece of knowledge they had about their character actually meant. If you've dished it all out the moment you introduced your new character (or plot strand, sub-plot or setting) then you're not going to have anything left to reveal at the right moment.

Here's a section of our Benny story that isn't layered at all - it's all served up for the reader in an unwieldy chunk.

The principal, who was called Mr Peters, had arrived about five minutes late, and then had shown Benny into his office. After making him sit on the hardest chair in the room, which Benny found uncomfortable because of his thin legs, Mr Peters read out a long list of wrong-doings that Benny had carried out that morning.

The list included the fact that he'd been late for the third time that week, and then he'd forgotten to take the register to the office and had put it in his backpack instead, and then he'd

given George one of his peanut butter sandwiches and caused the other boy to swell up on account of his peanut allergy.

You may have identified the fact that Mr Peters is just introduced quickly to the reader, rather than the reader finding out what he's called by some other means (probably Benny). Then we get the long list of misdemeanours all at the same time. There is actually a tiny layering effect that gives us some idea of what Mr Peters and Benny are like - where the head makes Benny sit on the hardest chair - but that section is like the delicate filling sandwiched between bread that's too thick and doughy to enjoy.

If we have a go at layering this section, we might get something like the following:

'You again?' The principal threw open his door with a bang and nodded towards the Chair of Evil. 'Sit down, Burton.'

'There?'

'Yes. There.'

Benny sat down with a wince. There was a school myth that Mr Peters had created the chair himself to torture school-kids without being noticed. Nails stuck out of it at odd angles, and unless you perched on the edge of it and sat up ram-rod straight, it creaked like a Scooby Doo house so that Peters could snap at you to shut up.

Peters bared his yellow teeth at Benny as he struggled to find his balance. It was meant to be a smile. 'You have been busy, haven't you?'

'Sir?'

'At least, I assume you've been busy,' said Peters, staring down at a long list of scribble on his desk. 'So busy you can't get to school on time.'

'No, well, yes, but you see there was a bird that had fallen out of its nest, and ...'

The principal held up a scrawny hand. 'Yes, I'm sure it needed rescuing. The same as the class register, I presume. You do know that the whole school office was searching for that thing for hours. Miss Mays couldn't believe we had a whole class that was absent. And then I thought ... hmm, who might have failed to deliver the register to the office? Do you know what name I came up with, Burton?'

'Mine, sir?'

Mr Peters gave him a thumbs up. 'Yours, Burton.'

'I was going to suggest a new way of doing it, but then George sort of exploded on the playground and it went out of my head,' said Benny. 'Sir,' he added as an afterthought.

'Ah, yes - George. He's supposed to be your best friend. Gone off him, have we?'

Benny stared. George was brilliant. Without George there would be no point to his life at all. 'No ...' he said slowly. 'I haven't gone off him.'

'Then why,' said the principal, thrusting his face into Benny's so that he had to lean back on the Chair of Evil and make it screech, 'would you try to kill him?'

Ah. The peanut allergy thing. 'It was almond butter, sir,' shouted Benny. Not that there was much point in saying anything at all. Even with Benny yelling, Peters wasn't listening. The verdict was already decided.

'Save it for your father,' said Mr Peters, waving at the door. 'He'll be here in ten minutes to chastise you. I mean, collect you.'

Dismissed and in even bigger trouble than he could ever remember, Benny trailed outside to Reception.

salAd

The second A in SALAD is for ... As it happens

The major problem with 'telling' is that it reports everything after the fact. It has already happened, and the author is relating it to the reader retrospectively. Writing it 'as it happens' means quite simply that you put it down on the page in the order in which everything occurred.

There's often a tendency for authors, particularly visual writers who see the story unfolding in their imagination as if they're watching a film, to write the book in a filmic fashion. They open with a scene and then back-fill the story, in the same way as it might unfold if it were being viewed on a screen. It's okay to do this once or twice in a book, perhaps when you're starting a new chapter, but remember that - in children's books especially - it's far better to put the action down sequentially, as it happens, in the time order in which it occurs.

Take another look at the old version of Benny's story.

Benny sat nervously in Reception. He had gone along to the principal's office at 11.30am as the teacher had instructed him. At first he couldn't see the principal, but then he'd been told by the secretary that the head-teacher was on his way and that Benny should just sit still and behave himself. She said that she didn't imagine he knew how, but then she got on with some filing and left Benny alone.

The principal, who was called Mr Peters, had arrived about five minutes late, and then had shown Benny into his office. After making him sit on the hardest chair in the room, which Benny found uncomfortable because of his thin legs, Mr Peters read out a long list of wrongdoings that Benny had carried out that morning.

The list included the fact that he'd been late for the third time that week, and then he'd forgotten to take the register to the office and had put it in his backpack instead, and then he'd given George one of his peanut butter sandwiches and caused the other boy to swell up on account of his peanut allergy.

Benny tried to explain that he'd been late because he was putting a baby bird back into its nest, and that he hadn't forgotten to take the register but was going to suggest a new way of taking it which would involve doing it by computer. Then he tried telling Mr Peters that he didn't have peanut butter on his sandwiches. Instead it was almond butter and he shouted very loudly at the head-teacher that almonds didn't often cause allergies!

Mr Peters said he was very unhappy with Benny. Benny felt silly for shouting at him but it had been a very bad day for him too. Mr Peters had sighed, then sent Benny outside to wait for his father to arrive. Even though he was extremely terrified at what his father would do to him, as his father was always very strict, Benny had made himself sit in Reception instead of running off like he'd wanted to.

Here we find Benny sitting outside the principal's office at 11.30am, waiting to be told off for a number of things. It's like an opening scene in a film or TV series, and then the events of the morning are related after the fact. But what is the *actual* order in which these events occur?

That's right. First of all Benny gets up, leaves home, finds a bird. Then he goes into school, puts the register in his bag, and goes to maths. Next he goes outside with George and inadvertently poisons him. Presumably after that, the teacher gets involved and tells Benny to go and see the principal at 11.30am. Then he goes to the office and gets his telling off, and finally has to wait outside for his father to come and roast him.

If we put the action on the page in the order it happens, we'll be travelling through the story with Benny in real time. There will be no need for flashbacks, loops in time, odd coincidences and the like, which will not only make it a more straightforward read for the child audience, but will 'show' the story to them in a far more satisfactory manner that allows them to get involved.

And finally ...

sala**D**

The D in SALAD is for ... Dialogue

You will have noticed by now that reported speech does not look like dialogue on the page. As a result the text appears dense, and the sparkle of the conversation is lost.

If you look at a page of a book with dialogue on it, there will be more white space on the page and the overall appearance will be much more manageable. This is really important for children who might be put off by a book that they think is beyond their capabilities or looks 'boring'.

Not that you want pages and pages of dialogue. That's called a script, or a screenplay. A mix of dialogue and narrative is probably best. As I've been re-writing the Benny pieces, I've been adding in more dialogue as I go along, partly to show what Benny and the other characters are like in a subtle fashion, and partly to liven up the narrative. The one section that I haven't added dialogue into is this one:

Benny sat nervously in Reception. He had gone along to the principal's office at 11.30am as the teacher had instructed him. At first he couldn't see the principal, but then he'd been told by the secretary that the head-teacher was on his way and that Benny should just sit still and behave himself. She said that she didn't imagine he knew how, but then she got on with some filing and left Benny alone.

You will probably have identified the dialogue between the secretary and Benny, and there's also another conversation earlier, where the teacher tells Benny he has to go to the principal's office at 11.30am. Here they are 'as they happen' and in dialogue that's a good mix between action, thought and speech.

Miss Masterton stared at Benny over George's prone body. 'This is the last straw, Benny Burton,' she said, wiggling the lolly stick she was using to hold George's tongue down to stop him choking himself. 'I want you to see George into the ambulance, as for some insane reason he seems to like you, and then go to Mr Peter's office at 11.30am.'

Benny gulped. This was not looking good. 'I could take over tongue duty if you like, Miss,' he said.

'Ambulance. Mr Peters. That's it.' Miss Masterton spat the words out so hard that Benny worried poor George would get wet.

He checked as George was trolleyed into the ambulance. All dry. Not very well, but dry. 'See you later, mate,' he whispered, but George just glared at him. At least he was alive enough to do that.

There was nothing else for it but to head up to the principal's office. He popped his head around the door and attempted a cheery grin. 'Hello, Miss Mays.'

The secretary glanced up from her filing. 'Ah, yes,' she said, as if that explained everything. 'The Principal's not here yet.'

'I'll come back,' said Benny.

'No, you won't. You'll sit down and wait here where I can see you. And at least try to sit still, though I don't suppose a fidget like you knows how.'

Benny smothered another sigh as he sat down. Even the school secretary had unfair opinions about him. This day was going from bad to worse.

Putting it all together

You've now been introduced to the whole of SALAD, which is a guide to showing not telling. Just to recap, and show you the whole of SALAD at once, here is the mnemonic in its entirety:

S is for Subtlety

A is for Action on the page

L is for Layering

A is for As it happens

D is for Dialogue

The emphasis is on keeping it light, keeping it in order, keeping it moving, and keeping the reader involved.

Let's now put together the Benny story in SALAD fashion. Remember what it looked like when it was 'told'.

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The list included the fact that he'd been late for the third time that week, and then he'd forgotten to take the register to the office and had put it in his backpack instead, and then he'd given George one of his peanut butter sandwiches and caused the other boy to swell up on account of his peanut allergy.

Benny tried to explain that he'd been late because he was putting a baby bird back into its nest, and that he hadn't forgotten to take the register but was going to suggest a new way of taking it which would involve doing it by computer. Then he tried telling Mr Peters that he didn't have peanut butter on his sandwiches. Instead it was almond butter and he shouted very loudly at the head-teacher that almonds didn't often cause allergies!

Mr Peters said he was very unhappy with Benny. Benny felt silly for shouting at him but it had been a very bad day for him too. Mr Peters had sighed, then sent Benny outside to wait for his father to arrive. Even though he was extremely terrified at what his father would do to him, as his father was always very strict, Benny had made himself sit in Reception instead of running off like he'd wanted to.

Now here's how it might look with 'showing not telling'. I've added in some tiny links to ensure that it flows properly, but otherwise this is the different sections of SALAD, pieced together so that action is on the page, as it happens, with dialogue, layering and subtlety.

The morning began uneventfully enough. Breakfast - Weetbix. Dishwasher - locked and loaded. Backpack - packed on back. Benny set off for school, organised and feeling just a little smug that he was going to be On Time for once.

He scuffed along the street, kicking stones into the gutter, considering his grand plan for the computerisation of the school roll-call. He'd win the Science Fair, possibly even the national finals. Yay!

Benny was just lining up a crack gutter-shot when the pebble near his toe twitched.

'No way.' Dropping to his knees, Benny sized up the small, grey mass. A tiny black eye gazed back at him. It was the tiniest baby bird Benny had ever seen with feathers. How it had survived so far he had no idea, but it was definitely not going to be his fault if the poor thing carked it now.

The nest took some time to locate, and Benny wasn't even sure he'd found the right one. He popped the baby bird into it anyway. 'Cuckoos are always doing this,' he said to the bird in what he hoped was a bird-like reassuring tone. 'You'll be fine.'

The black eye blinked back at him as Benny launched himself out of the tree. Darn. That was the school bell. Picking up the pace, Benny set off at a trot, skidding into the classroom just

as Miss Masterton called out the last name on the class roll. She stared at Benny, then shook her head. 'Okay, Burton. Black mark for absence for you, and you can take the register to the office and explain to the school secretary.'

'Right,' said Benny with a sigh. Then, 'Right!' he said more cheerfully.

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George tore at the soggy bread as if he'd been starving in the Serengeti. 'More!' he said, practically swallowing the thing whole. Then he turned to Benny in surprise. 'Ny hong,' he said, pointing at his mouth.

George's tongue was swelling like a snake that had just swallowed a rabbit, and both cheeks had turned scarlet. He held up the sandwich crust accusingly. 'Ea nut?' he said.

'No, almond,' said Benny. 'Honestly, it's almond. People don't get allergies to almonds.'

Then George screamed something at him which Benny translated as, 'I think I do, you moron,' at just the same moment that his friend keeled over and hit the tarmac all over again. Only this time, George appeared to be unconscious.

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'You again?' The principal threw open his door with a bang and nodded towards the Chair of Evil. 'Sit down, Burton.'

'There?'

'Yes. There.'

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Then he remembered.

So much worse.

His backside had hardly recovered from the last beating his father had given him, and that was just for failing to put the rubbish out "properly". He wouldn't be able to sit for a week when Dad heard about his latest escapades.

Grabbing his knees to stop them from shaking, Benny watched the clock. Five minutes to his doom.

Three minutes.

One.

Now here's the amazing thing. They are the exact same story. Exactly the same. The only difference between the two versions is that one is 'shown' and would perhaps be a chapter of a book, and the other is 'told' and makes up barely a page of not terribly interesting information.

I know it's a lot to take in, but I think you should mark in your notebook that this is a significant moment. If you have managed to work this one out, you've pretty much cracked it. You are mastering the technique of writing for children. For anyone, in fact. And see how much fun you can have!

SOMETHING TO TRY

Go back to a piece of your own writing and identify instances of ‘telling’. Then have a stab at re-writing it using SALAD in order to ‘show’ instead of ‘tell’. Easy.

Summary

Showing not telling is one of the most difficult concepts to grasp for writers as there's very little evidence of 'telling' that remains in published books

Telling rather than showing is a strong signal to the reader (who may be a publisher) that the author is new to writing

Indicators of telling include dense text, reported speech, and over-explanation that takes place after the fact

How to 'show' is encapsulated in the mnemonic SALAD, as it's about keeping it light, and keeping the reader enjoying the experience

SALAD is S for Subtlety, A for Action on the page, L for layering, A for As it happens, and D for Dialogue.

Chapter 9 Sizzle and Sell

Finally! At long last, here we are at the last chapter of your online programme for how to write children's books.

It's been quite a journey. Alongside our characters, we've grown from a tiny seedling of aspiration - what if, one day, we might write a children's book - and traversed the ups and downs of plotting. We've hacked our way through the verdant Jungle of Showing not Telling, and crossed the Valley of Echoes by choosing our narrative voice. Selecting the age of our reader and our characters has become second nature, and now we're entering that chimney event, the climax of the process.

This is where the magic happens: where the fairy dust is sprinkled over the book so that the words spring to life and then disappear so that the reader is completely engrossed in your story to the point of forgetting that life exists beyond it. Where the conversations flow as if we were talking to our best friends, with these wonderful people who have somehow become our best friends. Where the wit and pathos of your writing style ease themselves over the foundations you have so carefully laid like Harry Potter's Cloak of Invisibility.

And it's where the next phase of the journey begins, as your book wends its way to the publisher or to your readers, ready to cast a spell over all those who drink in your story with the rampant thirst of someone who's been lost in the desert.

In short, it's where you add sparkle and sizzle, and then where you allow your book to leave your side and take its place in the wider world.

It's grown up. It's matured. Just as you have in your ambition to become a children's writer - a children's writer who will write more than one great book for children. Many more. It's time to finish this one, let it go, and move on to the next.

This is the part for me, when I am just ‘head down and writing’, that all that magic comes together. I’m no longer planning and shaping, I’m just opening myself up to whatever creative muse, god or bone in my body it is that enables me to lose myself for three or four hours as the words pour out of me.

Next comes the wonderful exercise of becoming a word-smith, where I look back (briefly) at what I’ve written and select a few choice words to fancify and titivate so that the language zings in whatever way is most appropriate for my reader. It’s where the writing really comes to life, and is polished to a mirrored sheen.

By now, your writing will already be lively and lovely, as your choice of voice brings authenticity to your narration, and your ability to show rather than tell has all that action unrolling on the page, right before the eyes of your entranced reader. Taking that a step further, we’re now going to drill down into some of that ‘showing’ and make it even more evocative with our use of specific words that really add sizzle to your language.

The first element of this is in your dialogue. I mentioned this in the last chapter as a way to show not tell, and also indicated that it’s better if you don’t try to be too inventive with ways to say ‘he says’ or ‘I said’. Now we’re going to discuss the construction of the dialogue itself, including the nitty gritty of punctuating it.

Exchanges

Some of the most useful dialogue techniques I learned came from my very brief career in writing scripts for a popular TV soap opera. The first is that you don’t need to spend too much time - or any at all - on the common greetings and farewells that we tend to use in everyday conversation. Leave out all the ‘Hi, how are you?’ and the ‘I’ll see you later. Where did we say again?’ and instantly your dialogue is much snappier.

It's rather like what we said earlier about not stating the bleeding obvious: we can generally assume that this sort of exchange has already taken place. It's a given, so we don't have to spell it out for the reader.

Therefore this piece of dialogue ...

"Hi, Linda, I haven't seen you for ages," said Bridget.

"No, Bridget," said Linda. "It's been a long time."

"How are you, Linda?" asked Bridget.

"I'm fine, thank you," said Linda. "How about you, Bridget?"

"Never better," said Bridget.

"That's good," said Linda.

"So when did I last see you, Linda?" said Bridget.

Linda scratched her chin thoughtfully. "I think it must have been at judo."

"That's right," said Bridget. "Do you still go?"

"No," said Linda. "I stopped going after that night."

"Me too."

"Why did you stop?" said Linda.

"Oh, you know, right, stuff got in the way," said Bridget mysteriously.

"Ah," said Linda.

"Look, how about you?" said Brenda.

"Yeah, well, I broke my leg that night." Linda smiled.

"Did you really?"

"Don't you remember, Bridget?" said Linda.

"Nah, I don't think so," said Bridget. "Should I?"

Linda looked at her. "Well, you did it."

"Me?"

"Sure, yes, with that illegal move you made."

"Gosh," said Bridget. "I didn't know that."

... becomes this piece of dialogue:

“Hi, Linda, I haven’t seen you for ages,” said Bridget.

“No, Bridget,” said Linda. “It’s been a long time.”

“So when did I last see you?” said Bridget.

Linda scratched her chin thoughtfully. “I think it must have been at judo.”

“That’s right,” said Bridget. “Do you still go?”

“No,” said Linda. “I stopped going after that night.”

“Me too.”

“Why did you stop?” said Linda.

“Oh, you know, right, stuff got in the way,” said Bridget mysteriously.

“Ah,” said Linda.

“Look, how about you?” said Brenda.

“Yeah, well, I broke my leg that night.” Linda smiled.

“Did you really?”

“Don’t you remember, Bridget?” said Linda.

“Nah, I don’t think so,” said Bridget. “Should I?”

Linda looked at her. “Well, you did it.”

“Me?”

“Sure, yes, with that illegal move you made.”

“Gosh,” said Bridget. “I didn’t know that.”

Can you see how much more direct and pertinent that is already?

The next thing to do is to take out all the filler words we do tend to use in everyday conversation, like ‘Um’, ‘Listen’, ‘Look’, ‘Right’, ‘Yeah, no,’ and so on. The aim of using these is usually to make the dialogue look like genuine conversation, but the effect on the page is to dilute the strength of the dialogue and make it look rather messy.

So:

“Hi, Linda, I haven’t seen you for ages,” said Bridget.

“No, Bridget,” said Linda. “It’s been a long time.”

“So when did I last see you?” said Bridget.

Linda scratched her chin thoughtfully. “I think it must have been at judo.”

“That’s right,” said Bridget. “Do you still go?”

“No,” said Linda. “I stopped going after that night.”

“Me too.”

“Why did you stop?” said Linda.

“Oh, you know, right, stuff got in the way,” said Bridget mysteriously.

“Ah,” said Linda.

“Look, how about you?” said Brenda.

“Yeah, well, I broke my leg that night.” Linda smiled.

“Did you really?”

“Don’t you remember, Bridget?” said Linda.

“Nah, I don’t think so,” said Bridget. “Should I?”

Linda looked at her. “Well, you did it.”

“Me?”

“Sure, yes, with that illegal move you made.”

“Gosh,” said Bridget. “I didn’t know that.”

Becomes:

“Hi, Linda, I haven’t seen you for ages,” said Bridget.

“No, Bridget,” said Linda. “It’s been a long time.”

“So when did I last see you?” said Bridget.

Linda scratched her chin thoughtfully. “I think it must have been at judo.”

“That’s right,” said Bridget. “Do you still go?”

“No,” said Linda. “I stopped going after that night.”

“Me too.”

“Why did you stop?” said Linda.

“Oh, you know, stuff got in the way,” said Bridget mysteriously.

“Ah,” said Linda.

“How about you?” said Brenda.

"I broke my leg that night." Linda smiled.

"Did you really?"

"Don't you remember, Bridget?" said Linda.

"Nah, I don't think so," said Bridget. "Should I?"

Linda looked at her. "Well, you did it."

"Me?"

"With that illegal move you made."

"Gosh," said Bridget. "I didn't know that."

Then we can take out overuse of names, because in everyday conversation we tend not to use the other person's name after the initial greeting, unless we're shouting at them or calling out to them.

So:

"Hi, Linda, I haven't seen you for ages," said Bridget.

"No, Bridget," said Linda. "It's been a long time."

"So when did I last see you?" said Bridget.

Linda scratched her chin thoughtfully. "I think it must have been at judo."

"That's right," said Bridget. "Do you still go?"

"No," said Linda. "I stopped going after that night."

"Me too."

"Why did you stop?" said Linda.

"Oh, you know, right, stuff got in the way," said Bridget mysteriously.

"Ah," said Linda.

"Look, how about you?" said Brenda.

"Yeah, well, I broke my leg that night." Linda smiled.

"Did you really?"

"Don't you remember, Bridget?" said Linda.

"Nah, I don't think so," said Bridget. "Should I?"

Linda looked at her. "Well, you did it."

“Me?”

“Sure, yes, with that illegal move you made.”

“Gosh,” said Bridget. “I didn’t know that.”

Becomes:

“Hi, Linda, I haven’t seen you for ages,” said Bridget.

“No,” said Linda. “It’s been a long time.”

“So when did I last see you?” said Bridget.

Linda scratched her chin thoughtfully. “I think it must have been at judo.”

“That’s right,” said Bridget. “Do you still go?”

“No,” said Linda. “I stopped going after that night.”

“Me too.”

“Why did you stop?” said Linda.

“Oh, stuff got in the way,” said Bridget mysteriously.

“Ah,” said Linda.

“How about you?” said Brenda.

“I broke my leg that night.” Linda smiled.

“Did you really?”

“Don’t you remember?” said Linda.

“I don’t think so,” said Bridget. “Should I?”

Linda looked at her. “Well, you did it.”

“Me?”

“With that illegal move you made.”

“Gosh,” said Bridget. “I didn’t know that.”

One, two, three and out

Already our piece of dialogue is much sharper, just by taking out a few unnecessary words.

However, it could be sharper still. Here’s where my soap opera training proved invaluable to me, as I was introduced to the concept of **one, two, three, and out**.

By this we mean that character one says something, character two responds, character one says something else that moves the conversation to a climax or ending, and then either they finish the conversation (out) or the second character retorts one last time (and out).

In effect, you're concentrating the dialogue down into the three or four pieces of information that turn the story, that move the plot along. If you can't boil it down to three, remember that odd numbers work well in writing, so choose five and out, or seven and out.

What are the critical pieces of information in our piece of dialogue now? I've highlighted the important parts below:

"Hi, Linda, I haven't seen you for ages," said Bridget.

"No," said Linda. "It's been a long time."

"So when did I last see you?" said Bridget.

Linda scratched her chin thoughtfully. "I think it must have been at judo."

"That's right," said Bridget. "Do you still go?"

"No," said Linda. "I stopped going after that night."

"Me too."

"Why did you stop?" said Linda.

"Oh, stuff got in the way," said Bridget mysteriously.

"Ah," said Linda.

"How about you?" said Brenda.

"I broke my leg that night." Linda smiled.

"Did you really?"

"Don't you remember?" said Linda.

"I don't think so," said Bridget. "Should I?"

Linda looked at her. "Well, you did it."

"Me?"

"With that illegal move you made."

"Gosh," said Bridget. "I didn't know that."

If we reduce the dialogue down to just the highlighted sections, it will look something like this:

“Hi, Linda, I haven’t seen you for ages,” said Bridget.

“So when did I last see you?”

“I think it must have been at judo.”

“I stopped going after that night.”

“How about you?” said Brenda.

“I broke my leg that night.” Linda smiled.

“Don’t you remember?” said Linda.

“I don’t think so,” said Bridget. “Should I?”

Linda looked at her. “Well, you did it.”

“With that illegal move you made.”

“Gosh,” said Bridget. “I didn’t know that.”

You’ll hear, if you read that aloud, that the tone of the dialogue is subtly changing. Linda is starting to come across more strongly, perhaps even sounding bitter or sinister, while Bridget appears to be genuinely ignorant of what she did. However, the dialogue is still in tiny sound-bites that straggle down the page, and we could make it sizzle still further by using that concept of ‘one, two, three and out’.

“Hi, Linda, I haven’t seen you for ages,” said Bridget. “When did I last see you?”

“It must have been at judo,” said Linda. “That night I broke my leg. Don’t you remember?”

“Should I?”

Linda looked at her. “Well, you did it with that illegal move you made.”

And then you could make it tighter still:

“Hi, Linda, I haven’t seen you for ages,” said Bridget. “When was it?”

“It was at judo,” said Linda, ‘on the night I broke my leg. Don’t you remember?’

Bridget looked bewildered. “Should I?”

Linda looked at her. “Well, you did it - with that illegal move you made.”

And then! We can make it even tighter by substituting different words for the word ‘looked’, which is often greatly overused in new dialogue as the author attempts to convey to the reader just what the character is doing. Try different verbs, or leave it out altogether.

“Hi, Linda, I haven’t seen you for ages,” said Bridget. “When was it?”

“It was at judo,” said Linda, ‘on the night I broke my leg. Don’t you remember?”

Bridget stared at her, bewildered. “Should I?”

“Well, you did it - with that illegal move you made.”

I hope you’ll agree that this is now a much more evocative and very much tighter piece of dialogue. Not only does it impart all the information as the first rambling section of dialogue, but it does it with additional atmosphere and apparent friction between the characters.

Speaker location

The other trick I use to keep dialogue interesting is to change the location of the speaker in the sentence. In the example below, every speaker is located at the end of the sentence:

“Hi, Linda, I haven’t seen you for ages. When was it?” said Bridget.

“It was at judo on the night I broke my leg. Don’t you remember?” said Linda.

“Should I?” said Bridget, looking bewildered.

“Well, you did it - with that illegal move you made,” said Linda.

It’s suddenly less interesting, isn’t it? What I tend to do, in fairly regular rotation, is place the speaker at the beginning of the sentence, in the middle of the sentence, at the end of the sentence, and then I might not mention them at all. Sometimes I’ll do it in the order of end, beginning, middle, no mention. It doesn’t really matter which order you put them in - in a ‘one, two, three and out’ situation it will vary the pace and make your piece of dialogue feel somewhat different.

“Hi, Linda, I haven’t seen you for ages. When was it?” said Bridget.

Linda said, “It was at judo on the night I broke my leg. Don’t you remember?”

“Should I?”

“Well, you did it,” said Linda. “With that illegal move you made.”

Then what I also like to do is change some of the ‘she said’ and ‘he said’ to complete sentences about some action that the character is making. It can subtly confirm details about what the character is feeling and going through

“Hi, Linda, I haven’t seen you for ages. When was it?” said Bridget.

Linda let out a sharp laugh. “It was at judo on the night I broke my leg. Don’t you remember?”

“Should I?”

“Well, you did it,” said Linda. “With that illegal move you made.”

Or

“Hi, Linda, I haven’t seen you for ages. When was it?” said Bridget.

Linda shrugged. “It was at judo on the night I broke my leg. Don’t you remember?”

“Should I?”

“Well, you did it,” said Linda. “With that illegal move you made.”

Punctuation

Now we’re down to the very last detail of dialogue writing. I’ve put it at the end, but actually it couldn’t be more essential to the quality of your writing, as there’s nothing more off-putting to an editor or publisher than a series of mistakes in grammar and 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 it that one of the sums is wrong. 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.

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 too 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.

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, the official name for dot dot dot). 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 are always written as space three full stops and another space, like this ... (or no space, three dots, space in US like this...)

There are never more or less than three full stops, and also they should be used sparingly rather than each time you want to infer a pause, or when you, the author, are 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. There are examples at the end of this ebook so you know what to do. Either is fine, but as usual, whichever you've chosen, stick to it throughout. The accepted form is for non-fiction to miss a line (as in the body of the text throughout this book) and for fiction to be indented but not miss a line (as in the examples of story throughout this book).

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.

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'. How about 'cycled' or 'raced', and 'grabbed' or 'half-inched' instead?

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 becoming a bookseller?

That same sentence could easily be:

Jasper cycled to the Corner Bookshop and bought Jack BC and the Curse of Anubis.

Or:

Jasper raced to Stories Galore and hid the last copy of The Never-to-be-Read Book.

You could probably 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*.

So there we have it. That final sprinkle of the fairy dust (or Magician's Moolah, or Ash of All-Death, or whatever specific name you would have given it in your book) that will lift your language off the page and directly into the heart of the reader. In fact, you'll have written this so beautifully that everything you have learned throughout the book will become completely invisible to the reader. They will simply be aware that they are submerged, body and soul, in an amazing story by a fabulous author. They'll love it so much that they'll then search every dusty corner of Stories Galore for your next book ... and your next ... and your next ...

It's almost the end of our journey together. This particular journey, at any rate, on this particular book of yours. If you'd like to think about where this wonderful story you've created might go to next, check out Writers Gotta Write, or www.jillmarshallauthoracademy.com.

I wish you all joy with it. And I look forward to hearing when you've reached your destination, packed your little darling off into the great wide world to make its fortune, and you take the next step in your life as an author ... in the story that never ends.

SOMETHING TO TRY

Write a piece of dialogue about two friends arguing over who is the best student.

Right, your Authorly Authorness. Seize a page of your opus, and sparkle it up with lively action and spot-on nouns.

(I've just done it with this sentence, which started life as: *Please take a piece of something you've written and add sparkle with strong verbs and specific nouns*. You can see what a difference it makes).

Go back to chapter one, remind yourself of your permission to be a writer, and go create children's book.

Ready? Set! RUN!

Summary

How much your story sizzles (and how well it sells) will depend on the words you choose and the way you write.

Your writing style and the story you've chosen to tell is what adds that unique quality to your book, overlaying the plot structure and character arc and issues which are common to all books.

Dialogue is a key component of showing not telling, and can be used to great effect to elevate your writing and move the story forward.

Dialogue can often be soggy and poorly punctuated, so as writers we need to hone our craft to make sure it is properly laid out, grammatically correct, and sparkling and insightful.

Another way to make your story-telling sizzle is to ensure your verbs are strong and active, and your nouns and pronouns are specific. It can be useful to do this at the editing stage; you might find that the biggest area for substitution is to improve the verbs of coming, going and looking.

By the time you're editing down to the last word, your book may be written and ready to go. There are guidelines for layout, what you need to send, and where you might send your book, and these increase your chances of getting your story seen by the right people.

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