

# Children's Book Insider

The Newsletter for Children's Writers

## At Presstime: *Publisher Seeks High-Quality Nonfiction for All Ages*

Enslow Publishers, Inc. publishes high-quality educational nonfiction and historical fiction for grades K-12, available through schools and public libraries. Most books are published in series. Authors can propose a book for an existing series, or a new series. Series for elementary grades feature animals, biographies, arts & crafts, holidays, math, science, technology, sports, history, communities, careers, and historical fiction closely based on real events. Middle and high school series include the same categories plus careers, current issues, health and drug education and government. It's essential that authors study current titles on the Enslow web site ([www.enslow.com](http://www.enslow.com)) before submitting.

Current needs for the publisher are biographies for all ages (especially multicultural and contemporary subjects), social issues, self-help books, science (especially experiments, the environment and animals), and high-interest topics for reluctant readers.

Send a proposal that includes a query letter (explain how your book fills a gap in the market, its intended length and grade level, how it will fit into the curriculum, other books on the subject and how they compare to yours, and any thoughts on marketing), a table of contents, outline and sample chapter. For picture books, a query letter only is sufficient. If you are an expert in your topic or have previous publishing experience, mention that in the query.

Submit the proposal with a SASE to Submissions Editor, Enslow Publishers, Inc., PO Box 398, 40 Industrial Road, Berkeley Heights, NJ 07922-0398.

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## *Magazine Seeks Craft Ideas and Family Activities for Ages 3-12*

*FamilyFun* magazine is for families with children ages 3-12, with more than 2 million subscribers. Its purpose is to give parents the information and inspiration they need to create unforgettable family moments. The magazine has a heavy emphasis on activities and ideas that are fun, family-tested, affordable and easy. The writing is straightforward, upbeat and personal. Brevity is essential because of the highly visual layout. *Family Fun* does not publish child development articles, fiction or poetry.

Seeking manuscripts for the following departments: Everyday Fun (simple crafts, recipes, games, and activities), Family Getaways (great destinations and tips for family vacations), Family Traditions (stories of simple activities that bring meaning to the lives of families) and Creative Solutions (parent-to-parent strategies for greater household harmony). Query with a description of the content, structure, and tone of the proposed article. Be specific as possible about what makes your idea unique and why you are qualified to write about it. If appropriate, include photographs or sketches of the finished project, food, or craft. Editorial responses to submissions will be sent via e-mail, so provide an email address for reply. If you'd like your materials returned, include a SASE. Send submissions by email to [queries.FamilyFun@disney.com](mailto:queries.FamilyFun@disney.com), or by mail to [name of department] Submissions Editor, *FamilyFun*, 47 Pleasant Street, Northampton, MA 01060. Articles will be assigned five months prior to the issue.

Material that ties in with upcoming issue themes have the best chance at publication. The themes for the second half of 2009 are: **August:** Neighborhood Fun, Cool-off Birthday Party, Backyard Crafts; **September:** Back-to-school Projects and Activities; **October:** Great Halloween Costumes and Treats; **November:** Thanksgiving Ideas and Recipes, Toy of the Year Awards; **December/January 2010:** Holiday Activities. Writers are advised to go to <http://familyfun.go.com/magazine> and to read several back issues to get a sense of the magazine's tone and layout before submitting.

January 2009

## At Presstime: *Publisher Seeking Picture Books with Educational Focus*

Sylvan Dell Publishing has announced that it will open its doors to submissions again on **February 1, 2009**. Sylvan Dell is a small publisher that produces fictional picture books that relate to animals (except birds), nature, the environment, and science. All books should subtly convey an educational theme through a story that will grab a child's attention. Each book has a three to five page "For Creative Minds" section to reinforce the educational component of the book itself. This section will have a craft and/or game as well as "fun facts" to be shared by the parent, teacher, or other adult. Authors do not need to supply this information but may be actively involved in its development.

All submissions should be fun to read (primarily fiction with nonfiction fact woven into the story); national or regional in scope (limited or local interest won't sell to a large market); must be marketable through special sales outlets such as zoos, aquariums and museum gift shops; and must be able to tie into the elementary school curriculum in some way. (The focus is teaching math and science through literature. Schools are the largest market, and books are aligned with National Science & Math Standards. Sylvan Dell also provides 30-80 additional pages of cross-curricular teaching activities for each book.) Sylvan Dell is not interested in stories about pets or new babies, magic or fairy tales, biographies, history-related books, ABC books, poetry, holiday books, novels or series. Previously-published books or stories that rely heavily on dialogue are not acceptable.

Manuscripts should be less than 1500 words. Current topics of special interest are natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions, hurricanes and earthquakes; geology; astronomy; botany; different animal habitats like caves, plains and grasslands, deserts, mountains, lakes or rivers; and books with a Rocky Mountain regional connection. Submissions are accepted by email only. Put the manuscript title and "manuscript submission" in the subject line. Include the text in the message or attached as a word document. Also include a biography paragraph of 300 to 400 words; a paragraph explaining why you wrote the manuscript; any competing works (author/illustrator, publisher, year published, sales data if available, etc.), and how your book is different; and any marketing ideas for the book. Email submissions after February 1 to Donna German at [DonnaGerman@SylvanDellPublishing.com](mailto:DonnaGerman@SylvanDellPublishing.com). Snail mail submissions, and submissions received before February 1, will be discarded without being read. Authors are strongly advised to review some Sylvan Dell books before submitting. See [www.sylvandellpublishing.com/catalog.php](http://www.sylvandellpublishing.com/catalog.php) for titles.

### *Ezine Seeks Articles, Crafts and Games for Tweens*

Imagination Café ([www.imagination-cafe.com](http://www.imagination-cafe.com)) is an ezine for ages 8-14, edited by Rosanne Tolin, the former Managing Editor for *Guideposts for Kids*. It's dedicated to empowering kids and tweens by encouraging curiosity in the world around them, as well as exploration of their talents and aspirations. Accepting submissions for the following departments: *Career-O-Rama* (Firsthand interviews with individuals in a variety of careers, and "Before They Were Famous"—brief summaries of what well-known people did for a living, prior to their rise to fame or power. Check the web site first to be sure you're submitting new material. Please follow the format of pieces previously published); *Weekly Special* (Nonfiction features on sports, science, history, and health. Subjects should be kid-relevant: snappy writing, subheads, and sidebars are pluses); *Embarrassing Moments* (Celebrity Screw Ups: Humorous briefs about celebs' most embarrassing moments); *Quizzes* (Multiple choice with four or five answers, or True/False format only. Humor is a plus); *Extra Helpings* (School Strategies on test taking, goal setting, studying, and more); *Doggy Bag* (Nonfiction articles and trivia about animals, and tips on keeping pets of all kinds); *What's Cooking* (Recipes spanning all food groups and meal times, plus snacks and desserts); *Game Room* (Original puzzle, maze, and "mad lib" submissions). Submit entire manuscript by email to: [editor@imagination-cafe.com](mailto:editor@imagination-cafe.com). Please include a cover letter, and cut and paste your manuscript into the body of the email. Buys all electronic and nonexclusive print rights. Pays \$25-\$150 per article on acceptance.

**Scholarships Available for Summer Workshop** — The Highlights Foundation Writers Workshop at Chautauqua (July 11-18, 2009, [www.highlightsfoundation.org](http://www.highlightsfoundation.org)) is offering scholarships for first-timers who have an established financial need. Scholarships vary in the stipend awarded depending on applicant and funds available. Deadline is February 13, 2009. For more information or to receive an application form, contact: Kent L. Brown Jr., Executive Director, [klbrown@highlightsfoundation.org](mailto:klbrown@highlightsfoundation.org)

**Children's Book Insider** makes every effort to verify the legitimacy of small and new presses and literary agents before printing information in "At Presstime." However, authors and illustrators should always proceed with caution when approaching publishers or agents with whom they are unfamiliar, and read contracts carefully. For a free copy of our Special Report, [How to Determine If a New or Small Press is Legitimate](#), send a SASE to CBI at the address below. You can also download this report and others from [www.write4kids.com](http://www.write4kids.com)

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**Subscribers: Please notify us immediately of change of address. CBI is mailed third class and will not be forwarded by the post office.**

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Managing Editor: Jon Bard

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## Book Publishing Today

### The Agent/Author Relationship in 2009

by Laura Backes

Back when Bill Clinton was President, we published an article on the pros and cons of having a literary agent. While a good agent/author relationship is timeless, we were curious about how some of the details may have changed. Here's what we found out.

In the current era of publisher belt-tightening, keeping track of which editors are buying manuscripts (and which are getting laid off) can be a full-time job. A well-connected agent can take the task of market research off your hands. "Well-connected" is the key term here. If your agent doesn't have good contacts at major publishing houses, she won't know any more than you will. And make sure those contacts are with publishers who do the type of books *you're* writing. Great relationships with young adult editors won't help sell your nonfiction picture book series.

Before email meant agents could send proposals to editors with the click of a mouse, agents asked their clients to reimburse them for expenses—such as photocopying and postage—incurred from submitting their manuscripts. In some ways, this is still true, says Jessica Regel of the Jean V. Naggar Literary Agency. "Some minor expenses are charged to the author. These charges are deducted from the advance or royalties checks, unless the author-agent agreement is terminated before money comes in and then we bill them. These charges are dwindling, since most submissions are made via email these days."

Adams Literary also deducts expenses from clients' advance and royalty monies, though the charges are typically quite low, says Josh Adams. "Where expenses will more frequently accrue is when we send galleys or finished books to our international co-agents for them to submit in their markets."

Simply having an agent won't make you a better (and therefore more saleable) writer, but often a children's book agent is willing to give editorial feedback to a promising author. "If we really like an unpublished author's submission but feel it needs considerable work before we could represent them, we'll give editorial suggestions and ask for a revision," says Adams. "Of course it is up to the author to decide whether they follow our advice and resubmit. We've done this successfully before, and it gives us a good indi-

cation not only of how well an author can write, but also how well they can take constructive criticism and revise accordingly, which they'll do with their editor."

Regel's guidance depends on how strongly she feels about the manuscript. "If I *like* a book, but feel it needs a lot of editorial work, I will send the author my notes and ask them to resubmit (if they agree with my notes). I will then take them on when I *love* the revision. Other times I will sign on an author first because I *love* the book and then I'll work with them on editing the book in order to get it into perfect shape for the marketplace. It's really a case by case basis."

The biggest reason many authors seek out representation is because quite a few of the larger publishing houses now take submissions only from agents. Others feel that agents increase their chances at getting a bigger advance on their first contract. Before children's books became a multimillion dollar industry, publishers didn't budge very far on what they'd pay for a first book, agent or not. But has that changed?

"I think an established agent can always get better *terms* for new authors. But, this may not relate to the advance money," says Regel. "For example, an agent could get them better royalties or a better subsidiary rights situation. Agents have their finger on the pulse of the publishing world and know what to ask for—and ways of getting what they are asking for!"

Many authors feel their agent's ability to get better contract terms easily pays for their 15% commission. Adams reiterates that an agent's value goes beyond a higher advance. "We believe in taking a long-term view of our relationship with clients by nurturing, developing and managing their careers—and hope they take a long-term rather than transactional view as well. Negotiating a better deal is just one of a multitude of ways we serve our clients and see that their best interests are represented and advocated, and we do everything possible to ensure that the overall value we provide to our clients far exceeds the dollar value of our commission. It's our goal for it to be invaluable and immeasurable."

#### How to Research an Agent

You can find agent listings in books like *Guide to Literary Agents* and *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market*. Attending conferences and speaking with other writers (or asking for agent recommendations on writing message boards) is another way to develop a list of potential agents for your work. Then visit each agent's web site, and note the agency's client list. Look at the books the agent has sold. Would your work fit the same market? Can you find these books on Amazon.com or in Barnes & Noble?

You can also search the database of agents who belong to the Association of Authors' Representatives at [www.aaronline.org](http://www.aaronline.org), and read the Canon of Ethics all members are required to adhere to.

When sending work to an agent, be sure to follow that agent's submission guidelines, just as you would when submitting to a publisher.

To find out more about the agents quoted in this article, check out the Jean V. Naggar Literary Agency (Jessica Regel) at [www.jvnla.com](http://www.jvnla.com), and Adams Literary (Josh Adams) at [www.adamsliterary.com](http://www.adamsliterary.com)

## New Book Helps YA Writers

Fortunately, most authors love to talk about what they do. When Victoria Hanley (author of *The Light of the Oracle*, *The Healer's Keep*, *The Seer and the Sword*, and the forthcoming *Violet Wings*) set out to demystify the writing process with *Wild Ink: How to Write Fiction for Young Adults*, she called on some fellow experts. Hanley's solid advice for writers trying to understand the ins and outs of the YA genre is balanced with interviews with YA legends such as T.A. Barron, Joan Bauer, Chris Crutcher, and Lauren Myracle. Aspiring authors can get a different perspective on the writing process with Hanley's other new guide: *Seize the Story: A Handbook for Teens Who Like to Write*. Hanley has heard from a number of adults and writing professors who say they find the concepts, examples, and writing exercises in *Seize the Story* to be unusually accessible and helpful. "This is probably because the book was written for teens, so it was designed to be, above all, readable—in the way that good fiction is readable. It's intended to be a friendly guide and companion for anyone taking the story-writer's journey."

In *Wild Ink*, Victoria Hanley explains that coming of age (the attainment of maturity and loss of innocence) is a fundamental theme of young adult literature. Other hallmarks are passion (joy, despair, fury, tenderness, terror, love); honesty (don't sugarcoat your story); independence (adolescent characters rebel against authority and solve their own problems); wild, often reckless exploration; and protagonists who experience breakdowns and breakthroughs. It's a turbulent, emotional ride, and if you're not ready to take that ride with your characters, you should consider writing for another age group. On the other hand, if you like teens and their blunt, forthright way of dealing with the world, YA fiction could be where you belong.

**CBI:** *Do you think there are certain writers who shouldn't write for young adults?*

**VH:** There are probably writers who can't write YA, just as there are writers who can't write fantasy or mystery or whatever the genre happens to be. But we don't know until we try.

To write for young adults, it's helpful if writers respect teenagers, and feel a personal affinity for coming-of-age themes. A big part of writing YA successfully involves making the connection with an authentic teen voice. That's why there are exercises in *Wild Ink* to encourage that

connection.

**CBI:** *I've met aspiring authors who want to write for teens but are intimidated by the edgy, gritty, realistic style of contemporary fiction. Are other genres "softer," so to speak, or does the writer have to still be very comfortable with the current teen mindset to write, say, historical fiction or fantasy?*

**VH:** Well, it's true that the sub-genre of contemporary, edgy fiction gets a lot of attention when people are talking about YA in general; there are more titles in the contemporary category than in other categories. However, there's plenty of room for authors who aren't drawn to write contemporary fiction to explore other sub-genres within YA, among them fantasy, sci-fi, horror, historical (including multicultural historical), magical realism, mystery, romance, humor, graphic novels, and religious fiction. I urge writers to let themselves be guided by their own genuine interests, because that's where the best and most compelling stories come from. And I think it's always helpful to remember that although the world changes, the spirit of youth is a universal constant. Great stories for young adults bring forth that spirit, no matter the setting or circumstances.

**CBI:** *The YA field is exploding right now. Did you sense, from the interviews you did for Wild Ink, that it's still fairly open to new authors?*

**VH:** Yes! Editors and agents are picky, but always on the lookout for new talent. And although the publishing industry is impossible to predict, the trend toward expanding the number of books on YA shelves seems to be solid. After all, it's a trend driven by readers eager for more books.

**CBI:** *Do you think self-publishing is a viable option for fiction as well as nonfiction writers, and if so, what are a couple of important points to keep in mind for the author considering self-publishing?*

**VH:** I haven't taken the self-publishing route myself, so the self-publishing chapter in *Wild Ink* contains several interviews with people who have. As far as I can tell, much of the answer to this question depends on a writer's goals. If the chief goal is to reach as many readers as possible, self-publishing is likely to be challenging, because the usual distribution/marketing channels aren't open to self-published books. It takes dynamic, indefatigable marketing efforts along with an excellent story to take a self-published book of fiction out of the writer's immediate circle. But if the

# Find Their "Inner Teen"

by Laura Backes

chief goal is simply to have a book in print, the self-publishing option is much faster. For one thing, it sidesteps the submission/rejection process so familiar to writers seeking publication through traditional publishers, a process that can continue for years. And a self-published title can go from manuscript to printed book in a matter of weeks, whereas going the traditional way typically takes between eighteen months to three years after the novel is accepted.

**CBI:** *As a YA author yourself, did you learn anything new from the interviews you did for Wild Ink?*

**VH:** Yes, I learned a lot! *Wild Ink* has quite a few interviews: four editors, three agents, three self-published fiction writers, four emerging writers, and nineteen successful authors of YA books across several sub-genres. They give a marvelous overview of creative writing, and how different the styles within YA can be. Something else I got out of reading the interviews was a recognition of just how common it is for writers to be rejected. I shouldn't have been surprised, of course, but somehow I was. So many rejections! And yet these writers persevered. Anyone who has ever received a rejection would be inspired, just reading through the accounts of rejections received by writers who went on to be successful.

**CBI:** *No writer is good at everything. To write publishable YA, at which elements of fiction writing does the author have to be most skilled?*

**VH:** The level of craft required to write publishable YA is very high. I wouldn't hesitate to say that some of the best writing around can be found on the shelves of teen literature. Intriguing dialogue, shiny scenes, brave plots, stomach-knotting conflicts, they all play a part. That said, a strong character voice can carry a YA book that isn't necessarily a stellar example of every element of fiction.

**CBI:** *In *Seize the Story*, you offer terrific before and after examples of paragraphs that are cluttered, overwritten, bland, passive, or stripped of voice. It's easy to see the flaws in someone else's work, but how can a writer learn to spot this stuff in his own writing?*

**VH:** This is such an important question. Critique applied too early can be crushing. But if it's never applied, the story doesn't stand a chance of moving from "okay" to "wonderful."

It's hard enough to write a first draft without having to deal with criticism, and during that

first draft, the imagination has got to feel safe enough to run free and do the hard work of creating something from nothing. That's why many writers, myself included, deliberately turn off our critical mind while writing first drafts. In the early stages, I remind myself that bad writing is still writing. Accept it, and keep going.

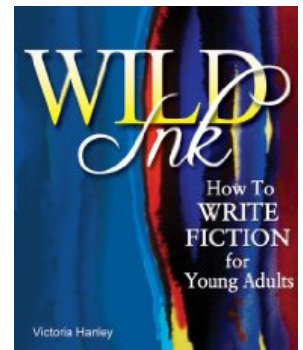
Once that first rough and messy draft is written, it's time to apply a bit of criticism. In the first round, I tune in to characters, and help those imaginary people really speak up and let me know who they are and what motivates them. In the second round, I strengthen verbs, strike excess adverbs, and eliminate tangents. Third round, I pay special attention to plot. There are more rounds, of course — every writer has his/her own approach to polishing, but one way or another we all put in the time. I recommend reading books on writing by authors with years in the business. And attending writers' conferences can provide not only excellent advice on craft, but also a sense of community.

Another way to get better at self-editing is by listening to other people. Since the only way to read our own work for the first time is to forget entirely what we've written, fresh eyes can make all the difference—and as we listen, we learn. We learn to be alert to problematic patterns within our writing, whether those patterns involve repeating favorite words/phrases too often, using the same sentence cadence over and over, forgetting to put in enough conflict. . . In any case, critique partners can be immensely helpful in identifying such things.

However, when submitting your writing for critique, it's crucial to find the right people to work with. Anyone can be a critic, but not everyone is helpful, insightful, or knowledgeable. You wouldn't grab a stranger off the street to advise you on your love life, your family finances, or your child's health. Your novel is no less important. Look for people with perspective and know-how, people who respect you enough to tell you exactly what's up. And of course, it's always the writer's call about what to keep, what to cut, and what to change.

**CBI:** *What's the best advice you received when compiling the interviews for these books?*

**VH:** Respect your reader. Understand that writing, like any other skill, takes practice and perseverance. Read all you can. Observe other people and the world around you. Honor your creative self. Don't give up!



*Wild Ink: How to Write Fiction for Young Adults* by Victoria Hanley (Cottonwood Press). Learn about Victoria Hanley's other books at her web site: [www.victoriahanley.com](http://www.victoriahanley.com)



[www.CBIclubhouse.com](http://www.CBIclubhouse.com)  
Hear a podcast interview w/ Victoria Hanley on writing YA fantasy at the CBI Clubhouse.

## From the Editor

### Things Have Just Gotten a Whole Lot Cooler.

By now you've noticed that CBI has received a face lift. It's a freshening up that's been a long time coming, and we hope you enjoy the new look.

But our cosmetic tweak isn't the big news of the month. Not by a longshot. Here's the real earthshaking development:

You are now all members of **The CBI Clubhouse**.

If you have no clue what that means, you will soon. You'll receive an email with login details for something that's much, much more than a web site. The CBI Clubhouse is your headquarters for learning, sharing and discovering. It's a true community with tools for communicating and collaborating. It's a repository for children's writing info, constantly updated with videos, audio, ebooks, articles and more. And it's all part of your current CBI subscription!

When you arrive, you'll be greeted by our new mascot, a fierce little guy ready to battle for every book contract. He's the symbol of our group — a group you are now a part of. That's right, from now on, we are... The Fightin' Bookworms!

As a Fightin' Bookworm, here's just a taste of what you'll find:

- \* **Video tutorials** to make your online life efficient and successful. (Check out Jon's video on an ingenious way become an expert on any subject in minutes.)
- \* **Podcasts galore!** Listen to exclusive interviews with authors Ellen Jackson and David Harrison along with shorter writing tip podcasts. Listen online or download!
- \* **Cool video extras.** Every month, we'll post a special video commentary to accompany the current CBI with background, extra details and suggestions to get the most out of each new issue.
- \* **Web site walkthroughs.** Follow along as Laura takes a video stroll through a publisher's web site, pointing out ways to access hard-to-find info that can help you get published.
- \* **Ask Laura.** Laura responds, on video, to your most pressing questions. You can even ask your question on video with our simple "video comment submission" feature!
- \* **Submission updates** from publishing houses, posted as we receive them.
- \* **The Money Saving Tip of the Month.** The first tip: how to save hundreds of dollars on software you need.
- \* **The Fightin' Bookworm Manifesto.** In a changing publishing world, we'll work together to define what it means to be a children's writer, and declare our intent to create great books while earning our fair share. Every one of us will have a say in this fascinating ongoing discussion.
- \* **The Bookworm Hangout** — a feature-packed forum where you can hang with your fellow Fightin' Bookworms and talk about anything you like. And check this out — we've created sub-forums for every state (as well as international regions) so you can meet Fightin' Bookworms where you live! Great for organizing meetups, critique groups or just finding writing buddies. And because only CBI readers have access to the password protected site, you're safe from spammers, flame wars and other hassles of public forums.

Plus you can send private messages to other Fightin' Bookworms, and every article on the site is comment enabled, so you can discuss everything you see!

This is a living site: in the future we'll be adding other exciting features such as video critiques, live webinars and teaching sessions with Laura and some of the top names in children's writing. So start dreaming about what you'd like to see, and we'll do our best to make it happen.

Let's be clear about this: The CBI Clubhouse does not replace the CBI newsletter — it *enhances* your CBI subscription. Your beloved *Children's Book Insider* newsletter will be the same as its always been (albeit it a bit prettier!). You are a member of the Clubhouse at no extra cost for as long your subscription runs. You don't owe us a penny extra to start enjoying the site right now.

Folks, this is the biggest step forward CBI has ever taken, and we're thrilled, nervous and giddy all at the same time. Go check it out at [cbiclubhouse.com](http://cbiclubhouse.com). Explore and let us know what you think. We built this for you and we want you to absolutely love it. And we believe in our hearts that you will.

Enjoy!

(PS: If you're a print subscriber and you don't get a username and password by the middle of the month, it means that we may not have your email on file. We must have that to generate your user info. Please fill out the form at [write4kids.com/print.html](http://write4kids.com/print.html) and we'll set you up.)

## Writing Workshop

# Writing Linear Stories that Sell

by Laura Backes

Judging by the manuscripts I've critiqued lately, linear stories are on the rise. Unlike traditional picture books, linear stories don't have a plot revolving around a protagonist who is working toward a goal or trying to solve a problem. There isn't the rise in tension as the story nears its climax. And the main character rarely changes in any substantial way from the beginning of the book to the end.

Linear stories tend to be a series of sequential incidents related in a simple cause-and-effect manner, or some other pattern. Each incident has the same weight as the one before. Often there is a logical beginning and ending point (the bunny saying good-night to everything in his room in Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon*) or the story circles around on itself (the last page echoes the first in *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* by Laura Joffe Numeroff).

Some linear stories masquerade as plots. For example, a character might have a pressing question, and asks a series of other characters until he finds his answer. The "linear" here applies to the straight, predictable line of the plot.

Linear stories tend to work best for the youngest audience. Many toddler books are linear, and work well for the developmental level of kids up to age 4. Check out [readertotz.blogspot.com](http://readertotz.blogspot.com) for a terrific introduction to toddler books. But the true picture book audience (ages 4-8) often find linear stories too calm and predicable. They want more tension in their books.

But the biggest strike against linear stories is that they tend to be ordinary. Most authors write about bedtime, the parent/child bond, visiting grandparents, a day at the beach/zoo/park, making a friend or taking care of a pet. Great topics, as evidenced by how many of these books we've already got on the shelves. Unless you're a famous illustrator (or a celebrity author), don't write about everyday events.

The good news is that most linear stories are timeless, appealing to generations of kids. So is there hope for *your* linear story? Yes, if you eschew the ordinary and embrace the tactics of these successful authors:

**Give your book a surprise premise.**  
Peggy Rathmann's *10 Minutes Till Bedtime*

is short on text and long on story, with most of the action being conveyed through detail-packed illustrations. The book begins with a boy's father announcing, "Ten minutes till bedtime!" from behind his newspaper. Through the window the boy and his pet hamster see a hamster family (with kids numbered 1 to 10) approaching the house. "All aboard!" shouts the boy's hamster, as the boy opens the front door and the hamster tourists board a tiny trolley. The boy doesn't know that his hamster has advertised on the Web ([www.hamstertours.com](http://www.hamstertours.com)) for a "10-Minute Bedtime Tour," and more tourists are on the way. As Dad calls his countdown from ten ("Nine minutes till bedtime!") the hamsters take part in the bedtime routine, including bath, story, and goodnight kiss. The countdown from clueless Dad creates some tension, and the hoards of hamsters frolicking in the illustrations provide visual subplots. Even if you're not a talented illustrator like as Rathmann, you can write a text that combines an everyday event with silly extenuating circumstances.

### **Get your reader's blood pumping.**

Kids like to *feel* a story, and linear books are no exception. But, again, think outside the box. Eve Merriam's *Bam Bam Bam*, illustrated by Dan Yaccarino, is a rhyming story about a crew demolishing a building and then erecting a skyscraper. What four-year-old can resist a line like, "SLAM, SLAM, SLAM goes the steel wrecking ball." Kids have the opportunity to throw themselves into storytime with words like BAM, POW and ZOWIE, and Yaccarino's bright, geometric illustrations wield the power of a sledgehammer.

**Involve the reader.** Make the child part of the plot, and kids will turn to your book again and again. Though it's geared to preschoolers, I've seen much older kids fall down laughing after reading *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* by Mo Willems. The pigeon spends the book trying to get permission to drive a bus, and it's the reader's job to tell him "No!" At one point, the pigeon throws a very kid-like temper tantrum. Endow readers with veto power and then make them laugh at themselves, and your linear story will top the best-seller lists.



[www.CBIclubhouse.com](http://www.CBIclubhouse.com)  
Laura and Jon discuss linear stories in this issue's commentary video at the CBI Clubhouse.

## The Basics

# Meeting Your Characters

by Laura Backes

### **Character Development: Step One**

You'll need to lay a foundation to a character before beginning the writing exercises. Jot down any personality traits that you already know, as well as physical characteristics. Note details about the character's family, the place she lives, and the time period. Then think about what's important to your character. What's her most prized possession? Who is her best friend? What are her dreams? Also, work on some negative qualities. What are your character's faults?

You'll learn more about your character as you work on the writing exercises, but this gives you a jumping-off point.

If you've studied fiction writing you know that characters rule. Above all, your protagonist must leap off the page as a living, breathing person (or animal or doll or alien). Your antagonist (the force working against your main character) must be similarly real. But if you're writing an adventure story, or a thriller with a breakneck plot, why all this fuss about the characters? Because every plot point is a result of who your protagonist is: the situations in which he finds himself, how they affect him, the ways he reacts, and why he cares in the first place.

Given the importance of primary characters in fiction, it's wise to spend time developing them beyond their general descriptions, likes and dislikes, and one or two personality quirks. Try these writing exercises to help reveal surprising aspects to your characters without bleeding them (metaphorically) dry:

**Describe your character from the bottom up.** Close your eyes and picture your character's feet. Is she wearing shoes? Are they clean or dirty? What do her socks look like? Are there any holes in the toes? Now move up your character's legs. Is she wearing pants, shorts or a skirt? If you can see her legs, what do they look like? Any bruises or scabs? What's in her pockets? Move up to her shoulders. What does her shirt look like? Is she wearing jewelry? Does she have a purse or backpack? What's in it? Finally, describe your character's face.

You'll find that the traits a character has control over (cleanliness, what's in her wallet) tell you much more about her than her physical makeup. Things your character might not control (the uniform she has to wear for school, the scar on her knee from a skateboarding accident) will give you a window into other aspects of your character's life.

**Identify your character's biggest fear, or what makes him most uncomfortable.** In riveting fiction, a protagonist's deepest, darkest secret is forced to light. If you're writing

for young children, the "fear" might simply be something that bothers your character that he wants to fix (a fight with a friend, anxiety about starting school). Either way, you need to mine these emotions in your plot. But first, you have to really explore them. Take your character and place him in a situation that triggers his biggest fear (it's best if it's not a situation from your book). Write about your character's reaction. Does he help himself, or seek help from an adult or authority figure? Does he curl up and hide, or come out swinging? Try different reactions, and see which is most believable.

Do this with your antagonist as well (if the antagonist is a character and not something like a tornado or an illness). Finding your villain's weak spots is as important as finding what makes your hero run and hide.

**How would an acquaintance describe your character?** Adopt the viewpoint of your character's best friend, and write a paragraph in that person's voice describing your protagonist. Repeat from the viewpoint of your character's parents, teacher, and next door neighbor. Then have your protagonist describe herself in first person. Ideally, the characteristics will overlap, but not be identical in each description.

Do the same for your antagonist, and then have your hero and villain describe each other. A lot of tension can be found in misunderstandings between characters.

Remember that how much you reveal about your protagonist depends on the story's viewpoint. If writing in first person, the reader would only know what the narrator thinks of himself, not what other characters think of him (unless they make their feelings known). So the reader might be missing some information. However, in third person, the author has the option of drawing a more impartial picture of the protagonist, and revealing nuances of character the protagonist might not even be aware of.

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