

Walking on a Rainbow:

Writing Fiction
Picture Books

By
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Walking on a Rainbow – a Children’s Fiction Picture Book Workshop

By Mayra Calvani

Have you ever dreamed of becoming a children’s picture book author? Perhaps you have lots of ideas sure to delight young readers, yet aren’t quite sure how to get started? Or maybe you’ve already tried your hand at it, but don’t feel confident enough to submit yet? If you’ve answered ‘Yes’ to these questions, then this is the workshop for you!

During this intense crash course, you’ll have the chance to write the complete first draft of a fiction picture book manuscript under 700 words. Why under 700 words? Because you want your story to be as marketable as possible, and that is the word count agents and publishers are after the most. You’ll be able to draft your story while learning the key elements that make a fiction picture book a success. Feedback will be provided by the instructor during each step of the workshop.

Topics to be covered include:

- What you need to know before you start writing
- Amateurish mistakes beginners must avoid like the plague

- How to grab the reader on the first page (setting, character and conflict)
- Point of view
- How to plot and develop an effective story arc (conflict, rising action and resolution)
- Understanding the “Rule of Three”
- How to add sensory detail
- How to develop a character arc
- How to think in pictures
- How to replace adverbs and adjectives with strong, precise verbs
- The surprising ending or twist
- Associations, clubs and newsletters beginners should know about
- Where to submit your picture book manuscript
- And much more

Note: This workshop will focus on stories written in prose, NOT in rhyme.

Requirements: Participants must either purchase or borrow from the library a copy of *A Visitor for Bear*, by Bonny Becker. The book will be used for the duration of the course.

Lesson 1

Topics:

1. What is a picture book?
2. Linear fiction picture books with predictable plot patterns.
3. Things you need to know before you start writing.
4. Bonus: “10 Tips on How to Get Started as a Picture Book Author.”

What is a Picture Book?

A picture book is a book that uses a combination of text and illustrations to present a story or idea. It is mostly aimed at children between the ages of 3 to 7.

Picture books that are aimed at a younger audience (0-3) are called board books.

Some picture books are aimed at older children between the ages of 9 and 12, but these are usually nonfiction picture books with a lot of text.

There are two main types of picture books: fiction and nonfiction.

Fiction picture books present a story and are meant to be fun and entertaining. They can teach a message but in a subtle manner that is not heavily handed or preachy. Some fiction picture books have a story arc, while others are linear and follow a predictable pattern. I'll explain about predictable pattern stories in the next section.

Nonfiction books teach ideas and concepts about the world and about objects, places and people. These can range from simple concepts such as numbers, colors, and the alphabet for the very young to the more complex ones such as history, science and biographies for the older kids.

Whether fiction or nonfiction, picture books are meant to delight children and stimulate their imaginations with the perfect blend of engaging text and vivid illustrations.

In its printed form, the classic picture book format has 32 pages, although you can also find books that are shorter (usually 24 pages) or longer (usually 48 pages). These numbers have everything to do with the dynamics of the printing press and pricing and relate to the 'business' side of publishing, so I won't be discussing them here. That's a subject that would require a whole course all by itself!

With the invention of ebooks and print on demand (POD), publishers no longer have to restrict themselves to these formats. However, the 'classic' 32-page picture book is still the preferred length with big traditional publishers.

The length of text in picture books varies. Some have no text at all and show the story solely in pictures, while others can be as long as 1,800 words. Usually, the more the text, the older the age target.

In general, the most marketable picture books are under 1,000 words and you'll want to keep this number as your limit if you want to increase your chances with traditional publishers.

Based on research I've made recently, including listening to agents webinars and well as talking to my own agent, I've learned that the preferred length with editors in today's competitive market is under 700 words. This seems to be a reflection of parents wanting their kids to read longer books at an earlier age, so publishers are trying to extend the gap.

Linear Picture Books with Predictable Plot Patterns

As I mentioned in the previous section, fiction picture books can have a story arc or they can be linear.

Although I'll be focusing on fiction picture books with a story arc in this workshop, I think it's important to give you a short, general overview of linear picture books with predictable plot patterns. For a more in-depth look on this subject, please refer to *Picture Writing*, by Anastasia Suen.

Stories with predictable plot structures use a variety of patterns. To make this lesson more engaging, I've include the links to the stories on YouTube. Some of the stories are animated versions of the original.

Some predictable patterns include:

Sequence.

This type of picture book usually uses the days of the week, months of the year, numbers or letters to tell a story.

An example is *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, by Eric Carle.

The story begins with “On Monday...” and we know that each consecutive day will show the character doing something different.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHxtKg_oJe4&feature=related (animated version)

Cause and effect.

In this type of story, one action leads to another, and again and again until the end.

An example is *If you Give the Mouse a Cookie*, by Laura Joffe Numeroff.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4E4RnmG_Co&NR=1

Question and answer.

In this type of picture book, there's a question on one spread, and an answer when the child turns the page. The story follows the same pattern until the end.

An example is *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*, by Bill Martin, Jr.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdHCYgO9zh8>

Increasing structure.

This story goes from something small to something big.

In the story, *There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly*, by Simms Taback, the old lady swallows a fly. As the pages turn, she swallows bigger and bigger things until at the end she swallows a horse.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=altckbVlceM>.

Decreasing structure.

Same as above but its opposite: the pattern moves from something big to something small.

An example is *Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed*, by Eileen Christelow.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhODBFQ2-bQ&feature=related>

Accumulative.

In this type of picture book, the words or objects accumulate as the story progresses.

An example is *The House That Jack Built*.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3_tR59hcxwo

By now you should have a general idea of what entails writing a picture book with a predictable plot pattern.

These types of books with predictable plot patterns are sometimes called ‘concept’ books because they may teach ideas or objects such as time, colors, animals, foods, clothing, etc.

In today’s competitive market, however, agents and traditional publishers/editors are actively looking for fiction picture books with strong story and character arcs and not as much for stories with predictable plot patterns. Stories with predictable plot patterns are more popular with magazine editors.

Things You Need to Know Before You Start Writing

There are certain ‘rules’ you should keep in mind when writing picture books. I have put the word rules between quotes because for every rule there’s about writing, there’s a famous book that broke it. However, those are the exceptions.

These guidelines are meant to make you write a more marketable picture book manuscript:

Keep the conflict in your story age appropriate.

If your audience are kids ages 3-7, the conflict or problem your main character must solve should be one the young reader will identify with. You could create conflicts around the following topics: being separated from mom, getting lost, getting ready for a party, the first day of school, wanting a first pet, having a tooth pulled out, going for a first haircut, having to share toys, bringing a new sibling into the family, tidying up a room, etc. The list can be as big as your imagination, but it must stay age appropriate. Sure, these topics have been used again and again in stories. But it’s your own unique angle on the old theme what makes it new and fresh.

Create a character children will identify with.

Kids want to read about other kids or about animals with childish characteristics. They don’t want to have an adult as a main character—or, worse, an adult looking back to when he was a kid!

Again, there are always exceptions to the rule, but these guidelines are meant to make your manuscript *more* marketable.

Tell your story ONLY from your main character's point of view (POV).

This is really important. Whether you decide to use first person or third person POV, keep it going throughout the story without switching back and forth between the characters. This is a big no-no because it creates confusion in the reader and disrupts the flow of the story. Writers often refer to this as 'head switching.' Head switching is the sign of an amateur.

Choose one tense to tell your story and stick to it throughout.

That means that if you start your story in the past tense, as in "He closed the door and followed the business of making breakfast," you can't switch in the middle of your story to "Bear shows him to the door and shuts it firmly." You may think that this is pretty obvious, but you'd be surprised at the number of manuscripts I receive for critique that break this rule.

Have your main character solve the problem.

The main character is the only one who should solve the problem or conflict in your story. You can't have an adult or a friend or another character step in at the end and solve it for him. First of all, this is a sign of lazy writing because it shows you didn't spend enough time looking for a satisfying conclusion.

It's a sign of lack of imagination and looking for an easy way out.

Secondly, editors want stories that will empower children. Yes, it's true that in real life adults often step in to help their kids, but this is a no-no in children's stories.

Your main character must change.

This is where the character arc comes in. By overcoming and/or solving the problem, your character must change or grow in some way by the end of the story.

Becker does this beautifully in *A Visitor for Bear*. Look how Bear is at the beginning of the story and compare it to how he changes at the end. Bear goes through a transformation that is charming to behold.

The character arc is connected to the message or lesson of the story. However, it has to be handled with the outmost subtlety. At the end, Becker didn't write: "And that's how Bear learned to become social and have friends." This would sound preachy! Preachy writing is a sign of lazy writing because it shows you haven't taken the time to 'show' and not 'tell.'

Keep the language in your story age appropriate.

Remember your target audience is from 3 to 7 year olds. Keep the language level appropriate.

Remember every time the speaker changes, the paragraph changes.

Don't jumble all of the characters speaking into one big chunky paragraph. This is another big sign of an amateur. Besides it being confusing, it shows you don't know how to structure dialogue and paragraphs in a story. Again, you'd be surprised at how many beginning writers do this. That's why it's imperative to learn the rules right from the start.

Good:

“I told you to leave!” cried Bear.

“Perhaps we could just have a cup of tea?” said the mouse.

“Out!” commanded Bear.

“Most sorry,” said the mouse. “I'll be going now.”

Bad:

“I told you to leave!” cried Bear. “Perhaps we could just have a cup of tea?” said the mouse. “Out!” commanded Bear.

“Most sorry,” said the mouse. “I'll be going now.”

Always punctuate your dialogue correctly.

Agents and editors don't want to waste time with amateur writers who haven't taken the time to learn the rules of punctuation. They'll take a look at your first page, and if they

spot punctuation mistakes, especially in dialogue, they'll toss your manuscript in the bin. They receive dozens and even hundreds of manuscripts in one given week and don't have patience for writers who haven't done their homework. Commas, full stops, exclamation and question marks go *inside* speech marks.

Good:

“I told you to leave!” cried Bear.

Bad:

“I told you to leave”! cried Bear.

Good:

“Most sorry,” said the mouse. “I'll be going now.”

Bad:

“Most sorry”, said the mouse. “I'll be going now.”

Have your main character solve only ONE major conflict.

Don't have your character solve a bunch of problems in your story. Keep it simple. Again, remember your age group. Your character should overcome several *minor* obstacles in the story, but there should only be ONE overall major conflict.

For example, in *A Visitor for Bear*, Bear's main dilemma is that he doesn't want to be bothered, he wants to be left alone and so he has to get rid of this little mouse that keeps showing up and bugging him. In the process, he tries a few ways to get rid of him: first he asks him to go away, then he shows him to the door and shuts it firmly, then he roars at him out the door and locks it tightly, etc. Every time the mouse finds new ways to get in, Bear finds other ways to throw him out. However, there's only *one* main dilemma or story problem.

Don't overload your story with unnecessary characters.

Keep your picture books simple. There's beauty in simplicity. Don't make your stories complicated by having a lot of characters. Two to five characters is a good number for picture books.

Make every action count.

Don't turn your story into a manual by narrating every single action the character does. Every word in a picture book, every action and line of dialogue must be there for a reason. If your sentence doesn't move the story forward, get rid of it.

In *A Visitor for Bear*, when Bear is preparing his breakfast, all Becker writes is "He set out one cup and one spoon." She doesn't go into a long line of actions such as, "Bear decided to

prepare breakfast. He fetched his favorite yellow bowl from the cupboard. Then he looked for his wooden spoon in the drawer. To make the table attractive, he placed a red vase with a yellow flower in it.” Etc., etc., etc.

Which one of these two examples creates a stronger vision in your mind? Of course Becker’s! When you add a lot of unnecessary words to a scene, you dilute its power.

Beware of ‘tennis match’ dialogue.

For a picture book to be rhythmical, it needs to have the perfect blend of action, dialogue, description and narration. Be sure to incorporate a bit of narration and action between lines of dialogue so that the dialogue will not sound like a tennis match between the two characters. You don’t want the story to read like a screenplay.

Show, don’t tell.

This is one rule that will make your picture books stand out from the pile. Show your character’s emotions with action and dialogue—*not* with narration or exposition.

Nowhere in *A Visitor for Bear* does Becker write that Bear is angry and frustrated at Mouse. Instead, she *shows* us from Bear’s actions and dialogue.

Likewise, nowhere towards the end does Becker tell us that Bear has changed and now enjoys Mouse’s company. Instead, she

shows us by changing Bear's behaviour and gestures toward Mouse.

Bear's transformation (his character arc) is beautiful to watch in this winning picture book.

Use strong, specific verbs.

Whenever possible, avoid common verbs and replace them with strong, specific verbs that evoke the feeling you're trying to convey.

Boring:

“And the mouse **ran** out the door.”

Good:

“And the mouse **whisked** out the door.”

Boring:

““Unbelievable!” **said** Bear.’

Good:

““Unbelievable!” **rumbled** Bear.’

Beware of too much back story.

Sometimes beginning writers are afraid they aren't giving enough background information about their story or characters, so they begin their stories with unnecessary back story. It's okay to have back story in your first draft. Sometimes we need to write that back story to get to the heart of the conflict. But it's vital to remove it during the revision process.

In *A Visitor for Bear*, Becker narrows down her back story to two sentences: "No one ever came to Bear's house. It had always been that way, and Bear was quite sure he didn't like visitors."

That's all we need to know. Becker doesn't start the story with a long paragraph such as, "Bear lived in a cozy cottage in the heart of the forest far away from everyone. He didn't like visitors. He loved his privacy and always wanted to be by himself." Etc., etc., etc.

Narrow down your sentences to the essential and you'll draw in your readers faster into the story.

Don't add too much description.

Remember that a picture book is called a picture book for a reason. The text and artwork must complement each other perfectly. This means that you'll have to use adjectives and adverbs sparingly—make that VERY sparingly.

Take as an example *A Visitor for Bear*. In the beginning, when Bear is preparing breakfast, Becker writes: “He set out one cup and one spoon.” She doesn’t write, “He set out his favorite red cup and one huge wooden spoon.” This isn’t necessary because the artist will take care of those details. Let the illustrator do her job!

Bonus

10 Tips on How to Get Started as a Picture Book Author

I love writing picture books. They’re like quick candy. I love the rush of finishing a complete first draft in one sitting. For this reason, I’m always writing new picture books while I work on a long novel. However, writing picture books and getting them published take a lot of hard work, persistence and determination. It isn’t only about talent—though that is important, too.

In this article, I’ll give you ten tips on how to get started as a picture book author.

1. Dream big.

It starts with a dream. When you dream, you set your intention. This makes the wheel of the universe start turning in *your* direction.

Imagine yourself receiving *the call* from an agent or editor. Imagine yourself signing your first contract, your hand trembling with excitement over the page. Imagine yourself as a published author, doing a signing at your local Barnes & Noble, the line of fans reaching all the way out to the street. Imagine yourself accepting a prestigious literary award in front of a huge, clapping audience.

Never stop dreaming.

2. *Read critically.*

A lot. I'm not talking about 2 or 3 picture books a month. I'm talking about going to the library each week and reading at least a dozen books. I'm talking about planning a 2-3 hour reading marathon each month and gobbling up 30 books in one sitting. How much do you want to become a published author? That's how much you'll have to read.

Pay special attention to the techniques and formats of published picture book authors. What is the point of view of the story? How soon is the conflict introduced? How bad does it get for the character? What strong verbs does the author use? How does the character solve the problem? How is the message or theme of the story presented to the reader? Is there a twist at the end?

Great writing is always great writing, but keep in mind that styles and trends change and this applies to picture books. Older picture books written twenty or thirty years ago will usually have a lot more ‘telling’ and exposition than what is accepted today. If you want to know what editors want these days, focus on those books written within the last five years or so.

3. Study the craft.

Writing great picture books isn’t only a skill. It’s an art form. How do you expect to write a publishable story if you don’t know its elements, if you’ve never studied the craft? Can you drive a car blindfolded? Can you pass a calculus exam if you’ve never studied the subject? Just being a mother or grandmother doesn’t qualify you as a children’s writer.

- Study books on the subject. *Writing Picture Books*, Ann Whitford Paul, and *Picture Writing*, by Anastasia Suen, are two books you should thoroughly dissect and keep on your shelf. There are others, but in my opinion, these two are the best.
- Take an online class or a course. Anastasia Suen, author of over 100 children’s books, offers an intensive picture book workshop on her website, <http://www.asuen.com/workshops/w.pb.shtml>. Another great place to check out for courses is the Institute of Children’s Literature at <http://www.institutechildrenslit.com>.

The art of writing picture books, or any type of books, for that matter, is an ongoing process. Be prepared to keep learning, improving and evolving as a writer all your life.

4. Write.

Preferably everyday, but if that's not possible, strive for a minimum of 2-3 writing sessions a week. Make a habit. The more you write, the easier it becomes and the better it gets. Can a violinist get better at playing by practicing only a few times a year? Can a runner win the gold medal by running only a few miles a month? (And yes, getting published by a top NY house IS like winning a gold medal!)

Writing isn't any different. Don't obsess over one single story. I've known aspiring authors who've been working on the same story for years without writing any new ones. Editing is essential, but so is producing new work if you want to succeed as a published author. Besides, editors and agents don't like one-work authors. If an editor or agent becomes interested in your manuscript, then asks "So what else do you have," what are you going to say: "Hmm, nothing" or "I have completed and polished 5 other stories."

5. Edit.

We all know the saying, "Great work isn't written. It's rewritten." It's absolutely true. After writing a first draft, put it aside for a while (at least 3 weeks) so you can distant yourself from it. Then go back to it and edit it.

As a writer, you're your own worst editor, which is why it is so important to have a set of objective eyes look over your manuscript—but, please, not your mother or sister or best friend (unless they're published authors and knowledgeable in the craft). Join a critique group especially for picture books. A middle-grade or YA writer may not be familiar with the elements that make a great picture book (more about critique groups below).

Always strive for great. Don't settle for good or very good. That's not enough in the competitive field of picture book publishing.

6. Submit.

If you don't submit, your manuscript will never see publication. Don't be afraid of rejection. Most published writers get a lot of rejections. I've probably gotten 1,000 rejections in the last ten years. Let rejections empower you and make you stronger as a writer. Use rejections as a motivational tool and let them infuse you with positive anger. Every time you get a rejection, slam your fist on the table and say, "I'll show them!"

My favorite publisher directories are *Book Markets for Children's Writers*, published by the Institute of Children's Literature; and *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market*, by Writer's Digest Books.

7. Plan.

Okay, so you have set your goal: to become a picture book author. Now, work out a plan to make it work and stick to it. Design what your writing, editing and submitting schedule will be like. Having a plan will help keep you focused. Start your writing week without having a clear picture of what you'll be working on and you'll find yourself wasting precious time and wondering about the million other things you should be doing instead of writing.

Not planning ahead is the perfect ingredient for low productivity, procrastination and writer's block. I write on weekdays and take a break on weekends, so every Sunday I plan in advance what I'll be doing that week. When Monday morning arrives, I know exactly where to start. I don't have to waste time wondering about it.

8. Cut Off the Internet.

The Internet (including emailing) is one of the most—of not *the* most—distracting things for an author. Be sure to switch it off during your writing sessions. Use the Internet as a reward, *after* you've finished working. How do you expect to focus if you go online or check emails every few minutes while you write?

9. Join a support group.

- Join a club such as the Children's Writers Coaching Club, <http://www.cwcoachingclub.com>. You'll not only profit

from weekly critiques and audio classes, but also from a vastly supportive group of fellow children's writers.

- Join children's writing groups such as Childrens-Writers. You can interact with other children's writers, share information and resources, and ask questions about the industry and all aspects of writing for children. Check it out here: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/childrens-writers/?yguid=74030160>
- Join a critique group that specializes in picture books. A picture book has its own set of 'rules' that writers of young adult or middle-grade fiction may not know about. These writers may give you the wrong advice and even hurt your writing. Also, if possible, try to find a critique group that has both beginners *and* more experience writers. Chances are you won't get great feedback from total beginners because you're all in the same boat, whereas more experienced writers will know exactly what to look for in your manuscript. If you join Childrens-Writers (see previous paragraph), you can post a message to the group asking if there are any critique group openings.
- Join the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI). This is *the* organization to join if you're serious about becoming a children's writer. Benefits include local chapters and critique groups, conferences, an online forum, and *The Bulletin*, which

comes out every two months and is packed with articles and submission information, among other things. Check it out here: <http://www.scbwi.org>.

10. Subscribe to Newsletters.

There are two newsletters worth subscribing to. One is *Children's Writer*, <http://www.childrenswriter.com>, put out by the Institute of Children's Literature. The other one is *Children's Book Insider*, <http://write4kids.com>.

These publications will keep you up to date about the world of children's publishing, current trends, submission calls, as well as offer writing tips.

Yes, it takes a lot of hard work to become a children's picture book author, but the rewards are immense. If you're committed enough and determined enough, you can do it.

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Assignment:

Begin brainstorming your story!

www.MayraCalvani.com www.MayrasSecretBookcase.com

Things to keep in mind:

Your character(s)

Point of view

Tense

Setting

Major conflict/problem

Minor obstacles

Ending/resolution

It's okay if you don't know all the elements yet. You'll have opportunity to keep crafting your story as we look into Acts I, II and III in more detail.

Have fun!

Mayra

Walking on a Rainbow – a Fiction Picture Book Workshop

Lesson 2

Topics:

- General overview of Act I, Act II, and Act III.
- Special techniques you can use in your story.
- Creating your main character (MC).
- Assignment: Begin mapping your story and character arcs using index cards or a blank piece of paper.

General overview of Act I, Act II, and Act III

It's no coincidence so many writers use the 3-Act structure when plotting their novels and screenplays. They use it because it works. It has worked for hundreds of years. The 3-Act structure can be easily applied to fiction picture books.

The 3-Act structure simply means a structure with a beginning, middle and end.

Act I is short, usually as short as Act III. The bulk of your story will belong in Act II. So if your story is 700 words, Act I will probably have about 100 words, Act II about 500 words, and Act 3 about 100 words. These numbers can go up or down

depending on each individual story, so be flexible. These numbers are only meant to serve as guidelines and are not meant to constrain you.

In Act I, the character(s), setting, and problem, conflict or dilemma are introduced. At the end of Act I there's usually an inciting incident or twist that will bring it to Act II.

In Act II, your MC takes action and tries to solve his dilemma by overcoming a series of obstacles. These obstacles rise in intensity or become bigger and bigger, thus creating rising tension in the story. Act II usually has a midpoint (I'll explain this midpoint in my lesson about Act II) and ends at a low point for the character, a moment when all seems lost. This is the turning point that leads to Act III.

In Act III, you have the resolution and the end. Once you enter Act III, your story moves downhill fast.

Let's take a look at how Becker used the 3-Act play to plot *A Visitor for Bear*:

Act I: Bear is introduced. We learn that no one ever comes to his house and that he doesn't like visitors. Then, one day, Bear hears a "tap, tap, tapping on his front door." When he opens the door, he finds a mouse. This is the twist or inciting incident that moves the story from Act I into Act II. As you can see, Act I is pretty short.

Act II: Bear asks the Mouse to go away. But Mouse shows up in the cupboard. Bear cries to the Mouse, commanding him to go away once more. Bear goes further this time by picking him up from the tail and throwing him out himself. (See already how the tension is escalating?). But then, Mouse shows up inside the bread drawer. This time Bear rumbles “Away with you! Clear off!” (The words are printed in larger font to further evoke that feeling of rising tension).

Bear locks the door and shuts all the windows. But, lo and behold, when Bear opens the fridge, there is mouse. We see in even larger bold letters: “BEGONE!” as Bear roars with all his might. This is the midpoint of Act II.

Next, Bear goes to extremes to lock the rest of his house: the door, windows, chimney, and even the bathtub. Bear starts checking around for signs of Mouse, but it seems Mouse is gone. That is, until Bear lifts the lid from the kettle. There is Mouse again! (See how Becker provides a surprising twist for the reader? First we think the mouse is gone, but he really isn't.)

In the 2nd half of Act II, we begin to see a slow transformation in Bear. As Mouse lures Bear into accepting him as a guest, Bear softens more and more, until finally he's enjoying Mouse's company so much he doesn't want him to leave and wails “Don't go!” This is the lowest point for Bear, because he thinks Mouse is going for good and he will no longer enjoy his company. This is the inciting incident that moves Act II into Act III.

Act III: Bear gets rid of the ‘No Visitors Allowed’ sign and says “That’s for salesmen. Not friends.” We see Bear inviting Mouse back into his house for a cup of tea. The artwork shows them holding hands, which is quite endearing.

Special Techniques You Can Use in Your Story

Your story may have a solid, well-structured plot with a beginning, middle and an end. It may be a good story. However, this often isn’t enough with agents and editors. They want spectacular stories they’ll fall in love with. This means that you need to bring your story to the next level. You need to raise your story from common and good to great and fanciful.

Don’t be afraid to experiment with different techniques to push your concept further and inject some spunk into your storytelling.

I have some ‘inside’ information I’d like to share with you. You can use the following powerful, tangible techniques as a cold-hearted, plotting, controlling author to create that ‘magical’ read-aloud quality that makes kids so happy to cozy up to their parents with a good book. If you use them well, you’ll dramatically increase the marketability of your manuscripts. These tips were given to me by former Harcourt Children’s Books editor Deborah Halverston. (She works as a freelance editor now and you can learn more about her at www.DearEditor.com.) Her insight and advice has radically changed the way I write picture books. It was four months after I

began implementing her advice that I landed my children's book agent.

Deborah has given me permission to quote her. Here it goes...

Active Word Choice

“Picture books for this young age group (3- to 7-year-olds) are meant to be read aloud, and anything you can do to enhance the read-aloud experience will raise your chances with editors. To do that, your words should be fun to say, and there should be an over-arching sense of rhythm whenever possible. Never use a word simply because it tells an action when you can use a word that conveys the action along with offering a little thrill in the saying. The words you use must be active ones that evoke emotions or feelings, that are energetic rather than just do the job, and that just sound fun. Look at this narrative prose from *How I Became a Pirate* by Melinda Long:

I tried to tell Mom, but she was busy slathering my baby sister with sun block.

“*Slather* is evocative—it sounds slimy and gooey and boyishly wonderful. It is fantastic to read out loud. And all those *s*'s! This sentence is far more interesting than “I tried to tell Mom, but she was busy covering every inch of my baby sister with sun block,” don't you think? Definitely take a look at this bestseller picture book, as it has great rhythm throughout thanks to repeated

sentence structures and fun words. It's truly fun to read out loud. You see? If you couple your current awareness of repetition with more interesting words, then the read-aloud quality will jump to a new level.

“For yet another example, here’s non-rhyming poetry from *The First Thing My Mama Told Me* by Susan Marie Swanson:

*When I was one,
my grandpa spread frosting
on the birthday cupcakes.
Then he squeezed yellow letters
out of a tube.
He kept squeezing
until my whole name appeared.
Mama took a picture of me
smooshing my chocolate cupcake
and my yellow name.
Grandpa says
when I picked that cupcake up,
it looked like a rocket taking off.
My name was the
fire whooshing out.*

“This doesn’t rhyme, yet the rhythm is stunning. There are no common turns of phrase here. “Icing,” a straightforward word that would do the job, is never used. Instead, you’ve got great imagery that makes use of words that are wonderful in the

mouth and that share similar vowel sounds, like “smooshing” and “whooshing.” This passage is probably more poetic and its format more ‘verse’ than you are inclined to go, but it’s useful to read because it has great read-aloud quality and it sounds childlike. You can do this with your own story simply by reconsidering your word choice.”

Alliteration

“Another trick for enhancing the language can be found in alliteration. Sentences that feel great in your mouth are usually those with words that share similar sounds. This is called alliteration, and you can apply it to the vowel sounds or the consonant sounds. Look at this non-rhyming rhythmical text from *Whose Shoes?* by Anna Grossnickle Hines and you’ll see what I mean:

When I wear these clappy high-heeled shoes, tippy shoes, slippy shoes . . .

When I wear these clappy high-heeled shoes, I go clip, clop, clap.

“When you read that, you almost think it rhymes, don’t you? The alliteration is outstanding—lots of *p*’s and *e*’s and *o*’s and *cl*’s... the read-aloud quality is inviting and the energy of the

word choice is off the chart. Flavorful words that are fun in the mouth . . . you can't beat it!"

Exaggeration, silliness and humor

Deborah advises to break free from the mundane and the normal and to venture into the world of silliness and exaggeration.

As an example, she uses the classic picture book written by Judith Viorst: *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. Here's an excerpt:

I went to sleep with gum in my mouth and now there's gum in my hair and when I got out of bed this morning I tripped on the skateboard and by mistake I dropped my sweater in the sink while the water was running and I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

“What I want you first to notice is the storytelling style. It's one ridiculously long run-on sentence that, in shirking traditional rules of breaking up run-ons, builds upon itself in a true pile-on fashion, gaining momentum until finally we get to the punch line: “I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.” Isn't that final pummeling by adjectives fabulous?”

When creating your story, you should be willing to jump out of reality and leave behind the ‘normal’ possibilities for the events and their escalation. Don’t be afraid to break boundaries and go over the top, to move from the ordinary to the fantastic.

Experiment with different scenarios, no matter how crazy they may appear to you at first. Above all, try to make the escalations funny!

The following are two more techniques I’d like to mention.

These weren’t suggested by Deborah, but I think they’re very helpful tools for enhancing your storytelling:

Refrains

Refrains are words or sentences that are repeated in your story to add fun and rhythm. The words may be exactly the same each time or may be slight variations of the original.

Repetition is a super tool for picture book storytelling. Kids love repetitive phrases because as the story progresses, they anticipate them and say them out loud along with the adult reading the story.

A Visitor for Bear is a good example of a story that successfully uses a refrain.

Every time Bear finds the mouse, the narrator says: “there was the mouse! Small and grey and bright-eyed.”

www.MayraCalvani.com www.MayrasSecretBookcase.com

Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day also has a refrain, as you must have noticed if you clicked on the previous link and listened to the story.

Onomatopoeia

This is when words imitate or emulate sounds. Kids love to listen to onomatopoeia in stories. The ‘sounds’ bring the story to life and increase the suspension of disbelief because they make the fictional world of your story more real and immediate. But more importantly, they’re just FUN to read aloud!

Examples:

Ding! Dong!

Ouch!

Thump!

Crash!

Bang!

Woof!

Pop!

Plop!

Splash!

Squish!

Honk!

Beep!

Jingle!

Hip, hop!

Click! Clack!

Clip, clop, clap!

You can find countless others by googling “books with onomatopoeia examples.”

Here are two examples of books that use onomatopoeia. I was able to find their links on YouTube, so I’m including them.

Chicka Chicka Boom Boom, by John Archambault.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJEA0jzloK0>

Giggle, Giggle, Quack , by Doreen Cronin.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUuKp9x_2sY

Creating Your Main Character (MC)

You may have a perfectly balanced plotted story in your hands, but if your readers can’t identify or sympathize with your MC, you’re wasting your time.

I already mentioned that your story will be more marketable if your main character is a child or an animal with childish characteristics.

Here are a few more tips to help you create a character children will love:

Give your MC flaws.

No one is perfect, so no one likes a perfect character. Make your character imperfect. Give him a flaw children will identify with.

In *A Visitor for Bear*, Becker gives Bear flaws. He's rude and antisocial.

Yet, at the same time, there's something about Bear that's endearing. That's because we 'feel' that he can't help the way he is and that he's that way because he's probably been alone for a long time and has never had a friend. This makes us sympathize with him.

Give your MC the perfect name.

Don't take names lightly. Search in baby name directories before you decide how to name your character.

You may even do as Becker does, and just use the actual animal names (Bear and Mouse) as their proper names.

Don't give characters in your story names that begin with the same letter. In other words, unless they're triplets and their names are an essential part of your story, don't name your different characters Jack, Jason and Jacob. Children will be confused and will have trouble telling them apart.

Give your MC a single goal.

Yes, I know. I have mentioned this before. But it's vital that you know exactly what that single goal is. The more you narrow this down, the more focused your story will be.

Ask yourself: What does my character want? What's getting in the way of his goal?

In *A Visitor for Bear*, the answers are crystal clear: Bear wants to be left alone, but the Mouse is getting in his way.

Make your MC consistent.

Give your MC 2-3 characteristics and keep his behavior consistent throughout the story. His transformation must occur slowly and organically and must be a result of the natural progression of your story.

Becker does this wonderfully and almost magically in *A Visitor for Bear*. Bear is antisocial and rude in the beginning of the story and up until the midpoint of Act II (when Bear gives up). From that moment on, things start to change. However, the change isn't abrupt. The transformation happens bit by bit, one little step at a time.

Your MC must solve his own problem.

Yes, I know I also mentioned this before. But I'll keep repeating it until you have completely absorbed it.

Don't have other characters step in to help the MC solve his problem. Your MC must figure out ways to overcome obstacles and solve the main problem on his own. It's easy to have other characters come to the rescue. This is why editors view this as lazy writing.

Keeping the above points in mind will help you create a more likable character. Remember not to be frustrated if you don't know your MC well in the beginning. You'll get to know him better while writing the story. Stay curious as you write. Be inquisitive with your story and characters. Often they'll speak to you and let you know if you're going in the wrong direction.

Assignment

If you're using index cards:

1. At the top of one index card, write "Act I: Opening". On this card, write down your ideas for your opening. Remember that your opening should introduce your MC, setting and conflict.
2. At the top of another index card, write "Act II: Obstacle 1." On that card, write the first obstacle and what your MC does to try to overcome it. Don't have him succeed at this point. Remember his situation must go from bad to worse.
3. At the top of another index card, write "Act II: Obstacle 2."

On that card, write the second small problem your MC faces and what he does to solve it. Again, don't have him succeed. Things are still getting worse.

4. At the top of another index card, write "Act II: Obstacle 3." On that card, write the third obstacle your MC faces. Things are as bad as they can get. This is the lowest moment in your story for your MC.

5. On the last index card, write "Act III: Resolution." On this card, write down ideas for your resolution and ending. The very beginning of Act III is the WOW moment, the moment when your MC makes a decision or takes action to solve the problem. From here on, all goes downhill fast to the very satisfying end. On this card, write how your MC has changed.

We're still in the planning and brainstorming stages, so don't be frustrated if you still don't have all the answers to your story. This exercise has two objectives: to further reinforce the ideas I've discussed so far, and to give you more time for brainstorming.

If you're using a blank page instead of index cards:

1. Place the page sideways in a landscape position.

2. Draw four lines from top to bottom, so the page will be divided in five slots.

3. At the top of slot 1, write “Act I: Opening”; at the top of slot 2, write “Act II: Obstacle 1”, and so on until you have allocated a space on the page for all the elements of Acts I through III.

4. Fill in the same information I asked for the index cards.

I hope you’ve enjoyed these first two lessons!

If you’re interested in taking the complete 10-lesson workshop, please contact me at mayra.calvani@skynet.be.

YOU set the pace and frequency of the lessons.

Price:

\$99 with one-on-one feedback for the duration of the workshop

\$37 without feedback

Level: Beginner and intermediate

Course Description:

Have you ever dreamed of becoming a children’s picture book author? Perhaps you have lots of ideas sure to delight young readers, yet aren’t quite sure how to get started? Or maybe you’ve already tried your hand at it, but don’t feel confident

enough to submit yet? If you've answered 'Yes' to these questions, then this is the workshop for you!

During this intense crash course, you'll have the chance to write the complete first draft of a fiction picture book manuscript under 700 words. Why under 700 words? Because you want your story to be as marketable as possible, and that is the word count agents and publishers are after the most. You'll be able to draft your story while learning the key elements that make a fiction picture book a success. Feedback will be provided by the instructor during each step of the workshop.

Topics to be covered include:

- What you need to know before you start writing
- Amateurish mistakes beginners must avoid like the plague
- How to grab the reader on the first page (setting, character and conflict)
- Point of view
- How to plot and develop an effective story arc (conflict, rising action and resolution)
- Understanding the "Rule of Three"
- How to add sensory detail
- How to develop a character arc
- How to think in pictures
- How to replace adverbs and adjectives with strong, precise verbs

- The surprising ending or twist
- Associations, clubs and newsletters beginners should know about
- Where to submit your picture book manuscript
- And much more

Note: This workshop will focus on stories written in prose, NOT in rhyme.

Requirements: Participants must either purchase or borrow from the library a copy of *A Visitor for Bear*, by Bonny Becker. The book will be used for the duration of the course.

About the instructor:

Mayra Calvani writes fiction and nonfiction for children and adults. Her children's picture books include *Crash*, *The Magic Violin*, *Humberto*, *the Bookworm Hamster*, *Frederico*, *the Mouse Violinist*, *The Doll Violinist*, and the upcoming *The Fox in the Night*, and *Water Play*. She's had over 300 reviews, articles, stories and interviews published online and in print. She's represented by Mansion Street Literary Management. Visit her website at www.mayrassecretbookcase.com.