

Advice for Aspiring Children's Book Creators  
MY TOP TEN TIPS AND OTHER ADVICE FROM PEOPLE WHO ARE SMARTER THAN ME

by *Tom Lichtenheld*

1. **Join the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators.** <http://www.scbwi.org/>  
SCBWI is a group of people who are, or aspire to be, children's book creators. They are knowledgeable, friendly, and supportive. You'll learn more by being active in SCBWI than I could ever tell you.
2. **Do your homework.** Learn the basics of the business, learn about leading picture book creators, learn about cultural trends that influence picture books. A few suggestions:
  - Books about picture books*
  - [How to Be A Children's Book Illustrator](#)
  - [Illustrating Children's Picture Books: Tutorials, Case Studies, Know-How, Inspiration](#)
  - [Children's Picturebooks: The Art of Visual Storytelling](#)
  - General resources for picture book creators:*
  - [The Purple Crayon](#) – Everything about the art and business of children's books, in one place.
  - [Kidlit411](#)
  - [The Illustration Department](#) – A podcast (and more) about illustration.
3. If you're a writer, join a local writer's group and participate in critiques. Even if it's a group of "serious" writers, they should recognize that creating a children's book is every bit as challenging and important as writing the great American novel (If they don't, find a new group).
4. Before you send work directly to a publisher, identify publishers whose books you like and find a specific editor who has an appreciation for your kind of work, then observe their submission protocol. If you send your work to a publisher blindly it will end up in a "slush pile" along with hundreds of other ideas that are likely to be ignored.
5. If you've written a picture book, don't worry about providing accompanying illustrations, and resist the temptation to include notes for the illustrator unless specific images are required to understand the text. Publishers prefer picture book manuscripts without thorough notes for visuals because they want to choose the illustrator they think will do the best job, giving the illustrator an opportunity to apply their own vision. If you're a picture book illustrator, don't worry about having a writer-partner. While your portfolio should demonstrate an ability to tell a story visually, you don't need a complete, original book. If you don't have a story to work from, use a classic story to demonstrate your ability to tell a story visually.
6. Don't be paranoid about sharing your work with publishers, editors, or agents. No one is going to steal your idea and publish it without your knowledge – it's just not worth it for a publisher to do this. Also, 99.9% of people in publishing are decent human beings who are in it more for the love of books than the love of money (see item 9).
7. Trust the judgment of fellow writers, artists and experienced agents and editors. Don't take criticism personally; if numerous experts dismiss your idea or have constructive criticism, take their advice, and keep working. "*Write with the door closed, edit with the door open.*" – Stephen King
8. Publishers are looking for book creators who have depth and range, so demonstrate that you are more than a "one-shot" talent by showing multiple samples and constantly refreshing your portfolio.
9. Publishing doesn't pay terribly well so don't quit your day job. Be prepared to work on your craft in whatever free time you have, indefinitely, and enjoy the process.
10. Be nice to everyone.

Advice for aspiring children's book illustrators

by [Tom Lichtenheld](#)

1. Draw whenever possible. Draw while you're on the phone. Draw in restaurants. Draw during boring meetings. Especially, draw while travelling. I find that drawing when I'm supposed to be doing something else results in some of my best work, especially if I'm trying to solve a story or picture problem in a book. (I have a doodle on the back of a community theatre program where I had a breakthrough in a problematic storyline.)
2. Draw other artist's work. The goal isn't to copy the work, the goal is to discover and experience all the decisions made by the original artist while re-creating their work. Do this with books as well as paintings. Find a picture book you admire and sketch out the whole thing. I did this with [Clever Jack Takes the Cake](#) by Candace Fleming and G. Brian Karas. The process taught me a lot about composition and made me feel like a super-duper (though fake) illustrator.
3. *"I'm not an illustrator, I'm a designer who can draw."* – Dan Santat  
This is a brilliant observation by a brilliant guy. It means that composition must come before draftsmanship. Getting all the elements onto the page in the right place comes first; then you apply your own technique and style.
4. No amount of painting or coloring will fix a bad composition. The time you spend refining sketches and page designs will pay off in spades when it comes to doing the finished color. Take it from me; I've wasted many hours trying to paint my way out of a bad drawing.
5. Don't waste time looking at lousy art or lousy books. Surround yourself with work you admire, work that's better than yours. You may never be as good as you want to be, but you'll always have something to aspire to.
6. Familiarize yourself with best-selling and award-winning work. Bestsellers aren't necessarily the best books, but they have something people want, so you'll need some of that magic. Award-winning books are often more artful or experimental and therefore more inspiring.
7. Think of a picture book as a storyboard. Make it dynamic and interesting at the most fundamental level. Don't repeat the same design twice. Make everything serve the story. Think of page turns as edits. Surprise the reader without leaving them behind.
8. Create multiple sketches and pagination options. It's rare that your first sketches will be the best ones, so keep working until you've completely run out of options. [Here's a great site](#) about pagination that includes wonderful templates and other helpful tips.
9. *"Children like specificity without explanation."* – [Alison McGhee](#)  
The great thing creating for kids is that suspended disbelief is their default point of view. If you give them great characters, humor, excitement and/or drama, they don't need absolute continuity. Take advantage of this in your art as much as in a story.
10. Find a few go-to books, otherwise known as mentor texts, and keep them handy. I have three of these, each with a different purpose. When I find myself getting too serious, I flip through [My House](#), by Daphne Durand. It's a tiny book packed with goofy characters and nonsensical little stories – completely bonkers. When my drawing gets lazy I study [A Sketchy Past](#), a monograph of the work of Peter de Sève, the best (and funniest) illustrator of our time. When I need to study page design and remind myself that classic storytelling can be done in a contemporary style, I look to the aforementioned [Clever Jack Takes the Cake](#) by Candace Fleming and G. Brian Karas.

**Twenty Dos and Twenty Don'ts** by Mem Fox, worldwide bestselling picture book author

Note: These are one person's opinion and, as usual, there are exceptions to every rule.

**DO:**

- DO read recent picture books over and over again.
- DO make friends with a bookseller or librarian or storyteller: their advice and guidance can be enormously helpful.
- DO be original: try not to copy the ideas or structures of recent well-known books.
- DO become familiar with the nature of rhythm in exquisite prose or poetry by reading it aloud: learn a speech from Shakespeare, or several verses from the King James version of the Bible, or a long poem for children. Understanding brevity, rhythm, and cadence in prose will keep rejections at bay.
- DO ensure your story makes an emotional impact: the reading should change the reader.
- DO ensure that the content of the story will interest both children and adults, not just adults—a common fault which might well lead to publication but will never lead to best-selling status.
- DO write with narrative tension ie. solve a problem.
- DO 'show' and do not 'tell': try to reveal action and character through what the characters say and do.
- DO keep the text under 500 words if possible. Minimize description. The fewer words the better, since the pictures will provide many of the visual details in the story. A picture book is always thirty-two pages.
- DO remember that the secret of good writing is re-writing.
- DO constantly re-read drafts aloud during the drafting process: hearing is one way of perceiving what's wrong in the text, especially in regard to rhythm.
- DO send the text to publishers without any accompanying artwork unless you are both the author and the illustrator.
- DO ensure the text is written grammatically, and the spelling and punctuation are correct.
- DO type the manuscript on one side of the paper, with decent margins, double-spaced. It is acceptable to write the story in blocks of print, which suggest appropriate page-breaks, or simply as a straight telling from start to finish.
- DO remain confident and up-beat after rejections. Re-write, re-think and send the story off to another publisher.
- DO stay out of the illustrator's way. Interference by an overbearing author is rarely appreciated.
- DO retain humility, even after a bestseller. Success may not last and you may need the comfort of friends. Those who boast have no friends

## DO NOT:

- DO NOT write down to children. If the story makes adults wince, it will make children wince too. Write always for extremely clever, well-adjusted, lively children. Young readers will appreciate the compliment.
- DO NOT write about inanimate objects such as shoes, a coin, a kite, an ice-cube, a piece of sausage or similar. Stick to people, toys, animals, birds or engines.
- DO NOT use alliterative names or titles, such as Izzie the Ice Cube, Kenny the Koala or Tommy the Tired Teddy. Use names, which reveal something of the character.
- DO NOT write your story in rhyme. Prose is more effective. Most editors detest rhyme.
- DO NOT assume that plot is the most important element in a story, or even the only important element in a story. Character comes first. Next comes the precise choice of words and the correct rhythmic placement of those words. Then trouble...
- DO NOT forget that the rhythm of the text is the element that will, or will not bring the reader back to the story again and again.
- DO NOT write things like: he gasped, she spluttered, etc. Use the word 'said'. The gasping and spluttering, etc., should be obvious from the situation, if the writing is effective.
- DO NOT write a picaresque story merely filled with one episode after another, with no tension or problem or resolution.
- DO NOT forget that simple does not mean simplistic.
- DO NOT forget that if the writer couldn't care less about the fate of the characters the readers couldn't care less either, and the book will fail.
- DO NOT write stories that end: '...and then they all woke up.' Dreams as stories are frustrating, and are rejected.
- DO NOT write to teach. Children and publishers alike detest heavy morals.
- DO NOT attempt to bring up other people's children through your text.
- DO NOT get the name of the children's editor wrong when you send off a manuscript. Check the spelling by phoning the publisher, if possible.
- DO NOT get the name of the publishing company wrong, nor its address. Check that company does publish children's books and that its books are of high quality and are readily available.
- DO NOT forget to send a brief covering letter and DO NOT be 'cute' in this letter.
- DO NOT be surprised not to hear from a publisher for two or three months.
- DO NOT be surprised to find yourself working on a picture book text for a couple of years and DO NOT give up too soon.
- DO NOT lose heart after rejections: be resilient and tenacious.

## Five Rules for a Breakout Picture Book: A Quick And Dirty Guide

By Tamson Weston editor and publishing consultant, from [tamsonweston.com](http://tamsonweston.com)

**1. Character.** Think of all the recent bestsellers that you know of: *Fancy Nancy*, *Elephant & Piggy*, *Shark Vs. Train*, *Ladybug Girl*....What do all these books have in common? A character with loads of personality. A character that has potential to continue through many books. This may seem obvious (um...of course stories have characters?), but there's a tendency among some of us (you know who you are) to get all poetic and fancy and neglect the feisty protagonist. This doesn't mean you should stop writing those lyrical musings on the seasons, it just means that if you want to break-out book these days, a really charming, funny, cute main character is the best way to catch an editor or agent's attention.

**2. Language: Tell Don't Show.** This is not a typo. Just tell the story simply and engagingly. All those creative descriptions of the waves' foamy fingers tickling the sand? Save 'em for your journal. There's an antsy kid in my lap and all he wants is to get to the next page—pronto! So just say we're on the beach and leave it at that.

**3. Think about the pictures:** This will give you a complete sense of the story and help you achieve the second rule. Remember that a picture book is a collaboration. There will be some artwork that will connect some of the dots. Leave some room for the illustrator's work and don't explicitly dictate everything that should be in the story. That's one of the best things about a picture book—that cool dynamic between words and pictures. Don't wreck it by stepping on the illustrator's toes.

**4. Paginate!** Insert page numbers into your manuscript (leaving room for front matter). You needn't give each block of text its own separate, physical page, as it would be in the actual book. Just place numbers where the page turn would be. You can get a sense of how this might work by taking one of your favorite books and typing it out, noting where the page breaks occur. It's a fun exercise, and it will really give you a sense of one of the most important elements of picture books.

**5. Make it good.**

## **Top ten ways to get published**

*By Michelle Markel, author*

- 1.** Take a class in children's literature at a local college. Some classes are offered on-line. Learn about the elements of fiction: character, plot, setting, point of view. Learn about literary language. If you can't take a class, read books on children's literature – Nancy Lamb's *The Writer's Guide to Crafting Stories for Children* is one of my favorites.
- 2.** Read 100 books in the genre you write in (picture book, easy read, middle grade, young adult). Study how the authors used the elements of fiction you've learned about.
- 3.** If you write picture books, type the text and do a word count. This forces you to pay closer attention to every word of the text. If you write for older readers, type some of your favorite passages- then use the same parts of speech, same sentence structure, and write about a different topic.
- 4.** Keep a journal in which you record events/sights that caught your attention, even if you don't know why. Write down the most vivid sense experience you had. Months later you can go back and mine the journal for story ideas.
- 5.** Choose a subject you're passionate about, then write as often as you can. Allow yourself to have crummy days; but write!
- 6.** Wait at least a week (two is even better) after you've written your story, then read it again. Revise it as needed. Most revision is through elimination, though it can also involve changing the chronology of events, showing instead of telling, and other fine-tuning.
- 7.** Join a critique group. Sometimes you can form one with students from your writing class. You can also find one on-line.
- 8.** Wait a month before sending out your manuscript. You may find some last minute tweaking is needed.
- 9.** Learn about children's publishing. Go to bookstores and see what's being published. Read the spring and fall children's book issues of *Publishers Weekly*. Go to conferences where editors are speaking. Visit authoritative children's book websites such as [www.underdown.org](http://www.underdown.org).
- 10.** Join the Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), which offers an informative website, a newsletter and many regional and state conferences.

## **Picture Book Manuscript Evaluation**

*By Harriet Ziefert, author and founder of Blue Apple Books*

This is an excellent set of criteria for judging your ideas for picture books, written by a successful author and editor. - TL

1. What age child is this for? Is the topic right on for the age? Is it really for kids?
2. Will it result in a child thinking? And feeling? And doing?
3. Will it generate dialogue between adult and child? Will each be better off having read it?
4. Is it original? Smart? Interesting? Funny? Fun for adults, as well as kids?
5. Can it be read on several levels? Does it add up to more than its words?
6. What else exists on this topic? A lot? A little? Nothing? (If nothing, beware!)
7. Is it different and better than something else that's like it?
8. Does it have a distinct voice? Is the sound good?
9. Is it about a theme readers care about: separation and reunion, loss, growth and change, rivalry, envy, jealousy, delaying gratification, fear, mastery, independence-dependence...
10. Would a child like it? Is it worth a kid's time? Will it also resonate with an adult?
11. Do visual images come to mind—what's in the text for an illustrator?
12. Will the reader learn something new? Does it recall something from a universal childhood?
13. Has the author done his/her homework . . . i.e., is the book well-researched, with an appropriate amount of text for a 32-page picture book?
14. Does the author have the ability to tolerate editorial process?
15. Will it withstand the test of time?
16. What will linger after the last page is read and the book is closed?



## **Judy Blume's Advice for Aspiring Writers** **Actionable insight from the undeniably influential author.**

[Literary Hub](#)

---

“Read your work aloud! This is the best advice I can give. When you read aloud you find out how much can be cut, how much is unnecessary. You hear how the story flows. And nothing teaches you as much about writing dialogue as listening to it.”

—from [Judy's website](#)

---

“I don't believe in writer's block. For me there's no such thing as writer's block—don't even *say* writer's block.”

—from a [BuzzFeed reader Q&A](#)

---

“Observe. Make notes. Listen carefully. Listen to how people talk to one another. A good writer is always a people watcher.”

—from an interview with [Scholastic](#)

---

“When you're writing, you've got to knock the critic off this shoulder, knock the censor off this shoulder, and all those voices in your head—telling you that you suck, and nobody's going to read what you're writing, nobody's going to buy it or publish it—you have to leave them outside the workspace, and get rid of them.”

—from a [BuzzFeed reader Q&A](#)

---

“I once met a woman who wanted to write. She told me she'd read 72 books about writing but she still couldn't do it. I suggested that instead of reading books about writing, she read the best books she could find, the books that would inspire her to write as well as she could.”

—from [Judy's website](#)

---

“Start on the day something different happens.”

—from a [Reddit AMA](#)

---

“There are no hard and fast rules for writing, and no secret tricks, because what works for one person doesn't always work for another. Everybody is different. That's the key to the whole business of writing—your individuality.”

—from [Judy's website](#)

---

[On how to stay positive:] “Well it's best not to think about anything else; that's the only thing I can say. Just don't think about anything else. When you're in there [working], when you're at the computer, when you've got the pencil in your hand—and, by the way, I get my best ideas from a pencil. I'm a good rewriter; I like to revise much more than I like getting down that first draft—you just have to keep those bad, hopeless thoughts away.”

—from a [BuzzFeed reader Q&A](#)

---

“The best books come from someplace deep inside. You don’t write because you want to, but because you have to. Become emotionally involved. If you don’t care about your characters, your readers won’t either.

Those of us who write do it because there are stories inside us burning to get out. Writing is essential to our well-being. If you’re that kind of writer, never give up! If you start a story and it isn’t going well, put it aside. (We’re not talking about school assignments here.) You can start as many as you like because you’re writing for yourself. With each story you’ll learn more. One day it will all come together for you.”

–from [Judy’s website](#)

---

“It’s best not to dwell on what you’ve written, wishing it could be different. We all write what we can. We do the very best we can. You might think, oh, I wish I could write like so-and-so, but you have to write like yourself.”

–from an interview with [Scholastic](#)

---

“Yes, rejection and criticism hurt. Get used to it. Even when you’re published you’ll have to contend with less than glowing reviews. There is no writer who hasn’t suffered.”

–from [Judy’s website](#)

---

“Everybody who writes fiction draws from their own life, but if it ended there, it would be very boring.”

–from an interview with [The Guardian](#)

---

“I’ve no idea how writing works. My son says I’m the least analytical person he’s ever met. I think I’m just an instinctual writer. It comes and I go with it. It’s from some other part of the brain. I’m just glad it’s still coming . . .”

–from a [Reddit AMA](#)

---

“There is no right way or wrong way. There are a hundred different ways to tell the same story. Whatever works for you is okay.”

–from [Judy’s website](#)

---

“Keep writing! Don’t let anyone ever discourage you. Just keep on going, because you can’t help yourself. You have to write! No one chooses to become a writer. You write because you can’t *not* write.”

–from an interview with [Scholastic](#)

---

## **ELEVEN TIPS ON WRITING** by Jandy Nelson

Jandy is the author of *I'LL GIVE YOU THE SUN* and *THE SKY IS EVERYWHERE*.

- 1) **Be yourself.** What makes your voice unique is simply the fact that you're you, so be yourself completely and fearlessly in your writing. Get your personality on the page. Dive into your passions, sorrows, joys, idiosyncrasies, insights, your personal myths, monsters and miracles. This doesn't mean you need to write about yourself, you just need to write like yourself. Only you can be you and only you can write like you—that's your gift alone.
- 2) **See to your gusto.** Ray Bradbury said, ". . . if I were asked to name the most important items in a writer's make-up, the things that shape his material and rush him along the road to where he wants to go, I could only warn him to look to his zest, see to his gusto." It's crucial to explore characters/events/times/places/ideas that fascinate, horrify, confound, impassion, enflame, sadden, delight you, things that see to your gusto.
- 3) **Throw rocks at your characters.** Someone smart once said: Not only do you have to chase your characters up trees but once they're up there, you need to throw rocks at them. Characters need to get into big trouble. Do not protect them or care what readers will think of them. Conflict, whether internal or external, makes stories.
- 4) **Writing is revising.** As Anne Lamott advises in her wonderful book on writing *Bird by Bird*: Allow yourself to write a terrible first draft. Then you will revise, revise, and revise some more. But you need that first draft to begin the real work of writing a novel.
- 5) **Curb toward joy.** When I was in graduate school, I took a literature class for writers with Edmund White. One day in lecture he talked about how writers can get gloomy: always alone, tapping away at their keyboards for years, often with no support or feedback, and so to compensate for the potential dreariness that might seep into the work purely circumstantially writers might remember to curb toward joy. This idea hit me like lightning and has stayed with me since.
- 6) **Have a Funnel Head.** Let everything that compels you fall into your mind, into story. If Picasso hadn't stepped out of the rain one day into the Paris Museum of Ethnography he might never have seen the African masks that inspired his *Les Femmes d'Alger* and there might never have been cubism. Beg/borrow/steal. Be a collector of the amazing. Shake the world up in your head/heart and let it out all covered in you.
- 7) **Kill your darlings.** An oldie but goodie. Samuel Johnson wrote, "When you come across a passage you think is particularly fine, strike it out." Love this. Don't be writerly, be you. Also, be ruthless. Chuck anything that isn't serving the story.
- 8) **Take your time and to thine own self be true.** Don't rush and don't feel pressure to show or send your work out until it's ready. Do not think about the market. Write the story you must write and take the time needed to tell it the best way you possibly can.
- 9) **Sit in the dark.** My friend, the wonderful YA writer, Nina Lacour plays the same song over and over again all day long while she writes. Kent Haruf wrote blindfolded. I write in a dark room with earplugs in and sound machine blasting like a loony. Find the way to work that works for you.
- 10) **Remember writing is magic.** If you write fiction you get to live so many lives in your one lifetime. This is brilliant sorcery—enjoy it!
- 11) **Read every amazing book you can get your hands on.**

## PIXAR's 22 Rules of Storytelling

This is an incredible guide for writing any kind of story. I've put my favorites in bold. -TL

1. **Admire characters for attempting more than what their successes have been.**
2. Keep in mind what's interesting to you as an audience, not what's fun to do as a writer. They can be very different.
3. Trying for theme is important, however you won't see what the story is about until you're at the end of that story. Got it? Now rewrite.
4. **Once upon a time there was \_\_\_\_\_. Every day, \_\_\_\_\_. One day \_\_\_\_\_. Because of that, \_\_\_\_\_. Because of that, \_\_\_\_\_. Until finally \_\_\_\_\_.**
5. Simplify. Focus. Combine characters. Hop over detours. You'll feel like you're losing valuable stuff but it sets you free.
6. What is your character good at or comfortable with? Throw the polar opposite at him. Challenge him. How does he deal with it?
7. Come up with your ending before you figure out your middle. Seriously. Endings are hard. Get yours working up front.
8. Finish your story. Let go even if it's not perfect. In an ideal world you have both, but move on. Do better next time.
9. When you're stuck, make a list of what wouldn't happen next. More often than not, the material that gets you unstuck appears.
10. Pull apart the stories you like. What you like in them is part of you. Recognize it before you use it.
11. Why must you tell this story in particular? What's the belief burning within you that your story feeds off of? That's the heart of it.
12. Discount the first thing that comes to mind. And the second, third, fourth, fifth – get the obvious out of the way. Surprise yourself.
13. **Give your characters opinions. A character being passive or malleable is easy for you as a writer, but it's poison to your audience.**
14. What's the essence of your story? What's the most economical way of telling of it? If you know that, you can build out from there.
15. If you were your character, in this situation, how would you feel? Honesty lends credibility to unbelievable situations.
16. What are the stakes? Give us reason to root for the character. What happens if he doesn't succeed? Stack the odds against him.
17. No work is ever wasted. And if it's not working, let go and move on – if it's useful, it'll show up again.
18. You have to know yourself, and know the difference between doing your best and being fussy. Story is testing, not refining.
19. **Coincidences that get characters into trouble are great. Coincidences that get them out of it is cheating.**
20. Exercise. Take the building blocks of a movie you dislike. How would you rearrange them into what you DO like?
21. Identify with your situation/character. Don't write "cool." What would make YOU act that way?
22. Putting it on paper only allows you to start fixing it. If a perfect idea stays in your head, you'll never share it with anyone.

## **Kurt Vonnegut's eight tips for good short stories**

1. Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted.
2. Give the reader at least one character he or she can root for.
3. Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water.
4. Every sentence must do one of two things — reveal character or advance the action.
5. Start as close to the end as possible.
6. Be a Sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them—in order that the reader may see what they are made of.
7. Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia.
8. Give your readers as much information as possible as soon as possible. To hell with suspense. Readers should have such complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should cockroaches eat the last few pages.