Barbara Greenwood's Guide to ... Writing For Children

Children's books, like their clothes, should allow for growth, and their books at any rate should encourage it.
J.R.R. Tolkien

How is writing for children different from writing for adults? Let's begin by exploding a few myths. Yes, stories for children are shorter, but writing them is not any easier than other writing you might undertake. If anything, writing for children is more demanding. Children refuse to be bored. If you don't grab their attention with the first sentence, you've lost them as they head off to more exciting pursuits. Also, writing "short," is harder than writing "long." What it comes down to is that good writing is good writing, whether for adults or children.

In the following pages I offer a distillation of what I have learned over the past twenty-five years of writing for children, critiquing manuscripts and teaching creative writing. Use the headings to the right to help you search the site.

Getting Ready To Write
The Shape of a Story
Developing Characters
Writing Dialogue
Point of View
Writing Description
Creating Backgrounds
Brainstorming To Find Your Idea
Plotting
Revising
Working With an Editor

Getting Ready To Write.

READ, READ, READ

Good writers are readers first. One of the best places to learn to write is inside a story. All the elements that make a good story - interesting characters, exciting plot, suspense, surprise - must interact in a way that makes the story grow as an organic whole. The only place you can experience the dynamic interaction of all these elements is inside a story, so your first step in becoming a writer is to read, read, read.

Haunt the library.

Immerse yourself in current children's books. Read first for pleasure, but if a book grabs your attention, read it again analytically. Analytical reading takes the book apart so you can understand what makes it work. What techniques did the writer use to hold your attention? What is the balance between dialogue and description? How many characters does this story have? Too many? Too few? Does the action move so quickly that you feel breathless at the end? Does the writer create quiet moments in the story? Why did you feel satisfied or dissatisfied at the end?

Look at the copyright date to see how current a title is. As much as you may love certain books from your childhood, tastes and styles have changed. If you want to be published, you need to know how writers are writing now. ◎

Types of Books

Reading also gives you a sense of the range of book types that make up children's literature. These are intended to meet the needs and interests of children at various ages.

- Picture books combine pictures and words to tell stories which are read aloud predominantly to preschoolers.
- Easy readers use simple stories and simple words to help build reading skills in children just learning to read.
- Chapter books act as transitions between easy readers and novels. They use short chapters with a few illustrations to help children continue to build reading skills.
- Novels become more complex as the reader moves from intermediate to young adult levels. At all levels, children's fiction covers a variety of subjects, themes and forms.
- Information books, also known as non-fiction in the book trade. These use a variety of techniques and formats to present factual information simply and clearly to an audience that might have no background knowledge to draw upon.

Make yourself familiar with these various categories in the children's market. This will give you a sense of how each type most effectively delivers a story. As you read, ask yourself which of these would best suit your interests and talents. If you're starting this quest with the firm intention of writing a picture book or a young adult novel, keep an open mind. You may find your talents and interests fit more comfortably in another category.

Analyzing a Story

Teach yourself to be a better writer by analyzing stories. Read the story first for enjoyment, then a second time, keeping the following ideas in mind.

1. The writer's most effective tools are ACTION and DIALOGUE. Watch to see how the author uses them to move the story forward.

2. The opening should plunge the reader into the story. At the same time it must introduce the reader to protagonist, setting and problem. Watch for the ways in which ACTION and DIALOGUE reveal these elements.

3. In the opening, look for details that give hints about the central conflict of the story. What problem faces the protagonist? What does he want? Who or what is stopping him?

4. What happened before the story opened? Look for details about the "back story". When are these introduced? Important future developments should be foreshadowed. How is this done?

5. Each character should play an essential part in the unfolding of the story. Think of characters as chess pieces and identify the roles they play.

6. Character and plot should be revealed through ACTION and DIALOGUE. Watch for examples of revealing dialogue and action. Try to find sections where the reader is simply told what is happening. Is there a reason for this or is it "bad writing"?

7. How many different story lines or strands or ideas are in this story? How has the writer woven them together so that each plays a part in the resolution of the story?

8. Look for descriptive words or verbs using senses other than the sense of sight (which we over-use). Good writers are aware of all five senses when describing a scene.

9. Pacing - look for the build-up to climactic moments. Analyze the steps moving the scene forward. Look at sentence length to see how this helps with the pacing.

10. In juvenile literature, the ending should "close off" the emotional turmoil—give a sense of coming to rest or looking forward with hope. How has the writer accomplished this?

The Shape of a Story

There is no formula for writing a good story. The trick is to learn the principles of good storytelling, then let them sink to the bottom of your mind. Once these concepts become part of the way you think about writing, you can apply them to any of the forms that comprise children's literature. So, let's look at the principles.

Readers expect a feeling of satisfaction and completion when they come to the end of a story. If your story is going to fulfill that expectation, you must not only be aware of the architecture or overarching shape of a story, you must make it such a comfortable part of your thinking that the minute a story idea occurs to you, it begins to take on that general shape. Knowing the basic story shape frees your imagination to be creative with other aspects of the story.

Stories have three sections, beginning, middle and ending. Each of those sections must answer specific questions as the story moves forward.

Beginning

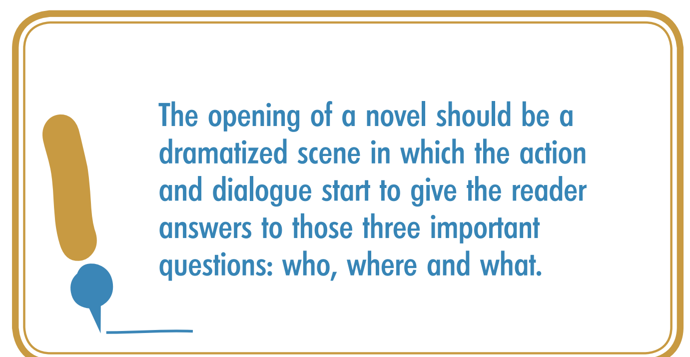
The opening of all stories, from picture books to young adult novels, answers three questions: who, where and what. As the first scene or the first chapter begins, your words must introduce the main character, or protagonist, through action that reveals something important about his personality and attitude to life. Then, weave into the action enough description of the setting so that the reader can form a mental picture of where the story takes place. But most important of all, you must give a strong clue about what the protagonist's problem will be. What is he struggling with or what difficult choice is he going to have to make?

None of these questions will be fully answered until the story has run its course, but the beginning of the story must be gripping enough to make the reader want to keep turning pages to find out the answers. Think about the opening scene of Maurice Sendak's Where The Wild Things Are. Max is rampaging about and "talking back" to his mother, showing an attitude that is bound to bring consequences. Mother, exasperated, sends him to his room. How is he going to cope, the reader asks, with being sent to his room without any supper?

Now look at the opening of E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*. From the moment we read, "Where's Papa going with that axe?" we're gripped by the intensity of Fern's outrage. Father is going to kill a baby pig? How barbaric! But at the same time as White is setting up Fern's problem, he's doing more. He shows Mrs. Arable placing a pitcher of cream on the breakfast table and Fern hastily pushing back a chair so that the reader can see the farm kitchen. White also uses Mrs. Arable's calm replies and Mr. Arable's gentle handling of Fern's outbreaks to give the reader a sense of the personalities of the parents. In two pages, the reader has not only been catapulted into the middle of the situation that will drive the story forward, she has also learned much about the world of the novel.

Middle

The middle is the longest section of a story. As the protagonist struggles with and finally solves the problem you've created, the reader looks for answers to three more questions: what happens next, how does it happen and why does it happen. The protagonist tries first



one way, then another to solve the problem, gradually learning and changing until she reaches a moment where he or she can finally "see" the solution and take steps to solve it.

The unfolding of the middle is most easily seen in the spare shortness of a picture book like Janet Lunn's *Amos's Sweater*. Amos is an old ram with thick grey wool and he is fed up with being shorn every spring. Having shown us the problem, Lunn walks the reader through Amos's attempts to prevent Aunt Hattie and Uncle Tom from taking his wool. First he tries to run away and fails. When Aunt Hattie uses the wool to knit a sweater for Uncle Tom, Amos tries to destroy the sweater. Pulling it off the clothesline doesn't work and biting holes in it doesn't work. Then, one evening when the moon is full, he sees it hanging on a chair in the kitchen. So begins Amos's final and successful attempt to get across to the two important people in his life how he feels.

Ending

The ending of a children's book must be short. Once the protagonist has solved his problem, the story is essentially over. But the reader still has a few nagging questions. The ending presents a scene in which one last question is answered: What does the protagonist know now, that he didn't know at the beginning of the story? Or, in other words: How has he changed? In the case of Amos and his wool, the picture says it all - a very happy Amos is out in the field cropping grass and wearing his sweater.

Charlotte's Web, which turns out to be the story of Wilbur the pig rather than the little girl Fern, ends on a warm, sunny day when Wilbur watches the little spiders hatch out. His heart still aches for his dear friend, Charlotte, but her children, sailing off on their silken balloons, show him that life goes on. The ending of a book for children offers hope. After the anxiety and turmoil of struggling with the problem, life returns to peace and tranquility. But, there is one change—in making choices and taking action the protagonist has learned something about himself or about life. He or she has taken one small step forward into maturity and will cope better with the future, whatever life brings. ◎

Stories Are About Change

The **beginning** presents the reason or motivation for the change.

The **middle** shows the change in process.

The **end** brings the change to a conclusion and shows its consequences.

Developing Characters

Each character in your story must be effective on two levels:

1. As a three-dimensional human being and
2. As an actor in the unfolding of the plot.

Roles Characters Play

In real life, you meet many people during the course of a week or month who will never be very important in your life, but in a story every character you introduce to the reader must have an important role to play. Think of your characters as chess pieces: what moves will he or she make to help take the game forward?

Each story has a number of key players:

1. **Protagonist:** the main character about whom the action of the story takes place. The story revolves around the protagonist's problem or some difficult choice he or she must make. Over the course of the story the protagonist must take action and, in the end, must solve the problem.

2. **Antagonist:** the blocking character, the obstacle to whatever goal the protagonist wishes to achieve. This character is not, necessarily, the "villain." The antagonist could be a caring mother who says, "No, you may not have a motorbike," or a coach who isn't convinced the protagonist is ready to be the team's goalie. In novels for older readers, the antagonist may not be a person, but rather the protagonist's own worst self or, in a survival novel, the hostile landscape. In a complex young adult novel more than one of these forces may be at work.

3. **Catalyst:** the trigger for the action. The protagonist's problem may be precipitated by the arrival of a stranger or anyone who changes the dynamics of a group, from the new baby to the new kid in school to "the man in the black hat." Not every story has a human catalyst. In some, the trigger may be an event that changes the status quo by presenting the protagonist with a new problem or a conflict.

4. **The Sidekick:** the protagonist's best friend with whom he or she exchanges thoughts and plans. Not every protagonist has a sidekick.

5. **Secondary characters:** all other characters in the story must line up behind either the protagonist or the antagonist. They either help or hinder the protagonist.

Making Characters Interesting

Even as your characters are playing their assigned roles in the unfolding action, each must also be an interesting person—someone real enough to jump off the page and into the reader's heart. To create these people, you need to think yourself into the skin of each character, particularly your protagonist. To do that, you need to know a number of things about each character.

- **Name:** A character's name is the reader's first clue to her personality. For example, say Jillian Jiggs out loud and you just know that Phoebe Gilman's character has to be a bouncy, happy person. The name, both as it looks written on the page and sounds when said out loud, should help the reader picture your character. For the protagonist, choose a name unusual enough to stand out in the reader's mind, but not so unusual that it's difficult to pronounce.

- **Background:** What kind of family does your character belong to? Well-to-do or poor? Do the parents fight with each other? Are they loving with the children? Where does your character stand in the family—eldest, middle, youngest? How old is he? How does he get on with his siblings?

- **Personality:** How does your character approach life? Is she confident or shy? What are her aspirations? What are her fears? What contradictory elements does she have?

Some writers begin by writing point-form biographies of their main characters in a notebook. The more you know about a character's past life, the more easily you can imagine how your character will react to the situation you are about to plunge her into.

Making Your Characters Live

Now that you know your character's personality traits, how do you get that across to the reader? After a powerhouse opening, the secret is to reveal your character to the reader in small details as the story unfolds. Your most effective tools are:

- **Action:** The choices your character makes at each twist and turn of the plot show what kind of person he is. For example, in E.B. White's Charlotte's Web Wilbur, the pig, makes a break for freedom. As he dashes around the farmyard, he's encouraged by the other animals to escape. All he has to look forward to on the farm, they remind him, is becoming bacon. This seems like excellent motivation for making a mad dash for the woods. Then the farmhand arrives with a pail of slops. Wilbur hesitates, then is tempted back by the succulent smell. The action shows us that Wilbur would rather be comfortable than free.

- **Dialogue:** Each character should have an individual way of speaking that grows out of his personality. If you were retelling Goldilocks you might show through his pompous pronouncements that Papa Bear is slow and ponderous. Perky Baby Bear, on the other hand, might chatter breathlessly. Vocabulary is also a clue to personality and background. A university professor is likely to express herself quite differently from an unskilled labourer.

- **Body Language**: How does your character move? Is she nimble on her feet or does she trip over things? If she were under strong emotion, would she grit her teeth or would her lower lip start to tremble? How does she show anger or excitement or anxiety? A fingernail picking obsessively at the flaking paint on a window ledge lets the reader **see** how anxious a character feels. This is much better than simply **telling** your reader that a character is nervous.

- **Interior Monologue:** The thoughts of the protagonist give you a powerful tool for deepening the reader's understanding of a character. You can show him reflecting privately on what is happening or beginning to change his attitude about a person or an event. You can even make obvious that what he says out loud contradicts what he really feels.

Keep in mind the ages of both your character and the child reader or listener. For preschool reader/listeners, your protagonist might display only one or two distinguishing character traits. The older the reader, the more complex and conflicted your characters can be.

- **Flashback:** Often an incident from the protagonist's past will illuminate an event in the present. Rather than recount the protagonist's entire past history, use a quick flashback in which the protagonist reflects on a past event. This will give the reader a deeper understanding of his current actions or feelings. ◎

Writing Dialogue

Dialogue, the spoken conversation in a story, is a powerful storytelling tool. It brightens a story and gives a sense of fast-moving action. But story dialogue is not the rambling, unfocussed talk we hear in everyday life. While pretending to be ordinary conversation, every word a character utters must do one or all of three things:

- **move the plot forward.** When characters are talking to one another, keep in mind what you, the writer, are trying to accomplish in this scene. Use dialogue to reveal what is happening. For example: "Bill, be careful! Watch that car! Oh, no. Quick, somebody, call an ambulance." In this case, the dialogue alone shows the reader what is happening.

- **give essential background information.** The reader often needs to know why a character feels or acts in a particular way. One character saying, "You remember that time Dad ran the lawn mower over Timmy's pet mouse ... " can fill in important information quickly and efficiently.

- **reveal personality and/or mood.** "Whatcha got there? Gimme that. And stop crying or I'll give ya somethin' to cry for." What kind of person jumps into your mind when you hear that speech? Do you need to see his face contort in anger to make a judgment about him? No, his words have painted him as a nasty person.

Interior Monologue

The protagonist's thoughts are a form of dialogue. These thoughts, called interior monologue, can perform the same role as dialogue in moving the story forward. They also perform other important functions. Interior monologue can do three things:

- It identifies one character as the protagonist. Because we can hear this character's thoughts, because we are privy to his inner life, we see the world of the story from his point of view. The reader empathizes with this character and lives his life vicariously.

- It gives us a deep understanding of the protagonist. If we hear him arguing with himself about an important choice he's about to make or hear his thoughts contradicting the words he is saying out loud, we are more aware of the conflicts that pull him first one way, then the other.

- It can be used to break up the narrative and brighten a scene in which the protagonist is alone. As your protagonist is slogging through the forest trying to find his way back

to camp, his thoughts not only reveal how he is feeling about his predicament, they can also be used to provide humor or show his sense of determination.

Making Dialogue Effective

Some writers sharpen their ear for dialogue by eavesdropping on conversations. This is an excellent exercise. When you're sitting on a bus or in a restaurant, listen in on a nearby couple. Notice how fragmented real conversation is, how often speakers cut in on each other, how seldom they talk in complete sentences. Try to get this cut and thrust style into your written dialogue.

At the same time as you pare the dialogue down to the bare bones, you must make it sound realistic. Test your dialogue by reading it out loud, pretending to be an actor playing your character:

- Is the dialogue easy to speak? If you run out of breath or get tangled up in the phrases, shorten and simplify.

- Is one character speaking for too long? A speech longer than four sentences should be broken up with action.

- Are the characters telling too much? Conversations often leave out as much as they include. Use blanks creatively. Readers like to work out the implications in a conversation such as: "So why didn't you go? You scared of that crowd? That Bugsy. I dunno ..."

- Is it hard to keep track of who's speaking? Use dialogue tags - he said, she said - at least every third of fourth speech to help orient the reader.

- Are the dialogue tags too colourful? The reader tires quickly of characters who constantly roar or hiss or sob. Save these tags for dramatic moments that need emphasis.

- Are there too many dialogue tags? Use action to identify the speaker. For example: "You can't make me!" Mary turned and ran from the room. Another trick is to have one character name another. "Mary, please don't do that."

- Have you used dialogue tags or action to throw the emphasis where you want it? Rather than: "I'll believe that when you show me the evidence," he said," try "I'll believe that," he said, "when you show me the evidence." In the second example, the reader can't help but emphasize that, giving the dialogue the rhythm and flow you, the writer, want it to have.

- As you read, do you hear the character's personality as well as his present mood emerging from the dialogue? If not, rethink to make sure you have a strong sense of what this person is like. Then rewrite.

- In suggesting personality, have you overused ungrammatical speech or dialect? A little of each goes a long way. Flavour the speech lightly with the odd ethnic word or dropped "g" rather than using phonetic spelling to imitate the way a character pronounces every word.

- Can the reader visualize your characters as they talk? Be sure to weave movement and gestures into the dialogue to reinforce how they behave as well as what they say. ◎

Point of View

In children's literature, the story always focuses on the events that are occurring to the protagonist - but that doesn't mean the protagonist always tells the story. Often it is more effective to have the story told by a third-person narrator who sees all the action. Sometimes a story is strongest when the protagonist tells the story herself. And sometimes, though rarely, a minor character can tell the story. The choice is yours and depends on what effect you want to achieve.

Third Person Narrator

The most common narrative voice is third person, also called the omniscient voice because the writer, like the puppet master, sees all and controls all. To add emotional intensity and give greater scope for character development, writers for children often use the "limited omniscient voice." This allows you to go inside the head of the protagonist so that as you are reporting, *Mary ran toward the house, her heart pounding,* you can intensify the emotion by letting the reader hear *"Please let him be here, she thought. Please!"*

The third-person narrator is essential if your story will go to places or require observations that your main character cannot make. If your protagonist is an 8-year-old girl, for instance, she can't very well discuss quantum physics or use the word "philanthropic," nor would she know much about driving a car. If these are important in your story, you'll need a third-person narrative voice.

First Person Narrator

First person point-of-view tells the story from inside the protagonist's head. The protagonist/narrator addresses the reader directly, as in the first sentence of Brian Doyle's *Angel Square*, *Let me tell you about last Christmas*. Because the protagonist is talking directly to the reader, this voice has a sense of immediacy and can convey intense emotion. This makes it very popular with teen readers and it is often used in YA literature.

The writer choosing first person as a narrative voice needs to find ways to compensate for its limitations. Among those are:

- **limited experience** - The story must be told through the eyes of a child who may not understand what he sees and hears. The writer has to convey what is happening without making the protagonist sound too precocious.
- **limited range** - Any event the protagonist doesn't experience first hand has to be reported to him by another character. This must be handled carefully or it will sound contrived if not downright boring.
- **identifiable voice** - To make the first person point of view compelling, the protagonist's voice has to be memorable and consistent. Something defining about the protagonist's personality has to be captured in the voice. In Julie Johnston's *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me*, Sara Moone displays both her anger and her edgy wit when she says, *Don't plan on digesting my whole life here because I've forgotten most of it. And what I remember would bore the brains out of a dead cow.* But having established the sound of the protagonist's voice, you have to keep it up from first page to last. And if the voice is too strident or whiny or smart alecky, you run the risk of turning off the reader long before the last page.

Multiple Points of View

Young readers find multiple points of view confusing, but for more experienced readers (10 and up), two or more viewpoints can add interesting complexity. Why would a writer bother? Some situations can be explored more fully if the writer can approach them from opposite points of view.

In Welwyn Wilton Katz's *False Face*, Laney finds a false face mask in a bog. This poses an ethical question of ownership. Laney, through her archeologist father, represents the museum's view that it should be available to the public. Tom, who is half Iroquois, sees the mask as a sacred object that must stay with his people. By using two separate points of view, Katz is able to present an emotionally-charged argument for each side of this question. If either Laney or Tom's position were simply told about or observed, the story would be skewed in favour of one or the other.

The technical problem with multiple points of view is making sure you don't confuse the reader. The solution is to alternate points of view scene by scene or chapter by chapter. In *False Face*, for example, a chapter from Laney's point of view leads toward a moment when she wonders how Tom feels about a given event. This sets the reader up to accept Tom as the point-of-view character in the following chapter.

False Face shows the use of two points of view. For a brilliant use of multiple points of view see Hilary McKay's trilogy *Saffy's Angel*, *Indigo's Star* and *Permanent Rose*. ◎

Writing Description

Description should create pictures in the reader's imagination. This is your tool for transferring the images in your imagination into your reader's imagination. The trick in doing that effectively is to use a light touch. Bring the setting and characters to life through details woven into the forward-moving action of the story. Make the description part of the storytelling, not a paragraph that stands alone.

At one point in ***How can a brilliant detective shine in the dark?*** Linda Bailey needs to describe the forest her characters are passing through. Here's how she did it:

After the blackness of the cave, the dark woods seemed almost bright. I was happy to put one foot in front of the other on the solid dirt path and listen to sounds I understood. Birds twittering. Insects buzzing. By the time we came out of the forest I felt back to normal. Almost.

Bailey might simply have said, *The forest was dark. It had a dirt path running through it. The sounds of birds and insects were heard.* This is static and boring. Instead, Bailey gives us an image of the forest filtered through the mood of the protagonist. This lets her use the setting to reveal how the character is feeling at that moment and also helps to move the plot forward.

Choosing the Right Words

ADJECTIVES

Writers need words that paint pictures - words that transfer as exactly as possible the picture in your imagination into what your reader sees. What picture do you see when you read, *She picked a beautiful flower?* For you that may translate into a rose, but for someone else it will be a gardenia. General adjectives - beautiful, nice, ugly, weird – don't communicate the writer's meaning. They don't paint pictures in the reader's mind. To find the **specific** words that create pictures for the reader you must use your five senses.

When you think about an apple, what do you:

SEE colour Red, green or yellow
Shape Round, oval or heart-shaped
Size "The size of a tennis ball."
"Small enough to close my hand around."

HEAR Crunchy

FEEL Surface could be smooth or bumpy or waxy
A bite could be juicy or dry

TASTE Sweet, sour or bitter

SMELL Sweet, sour or bitter?

What details make your apple different from other apples? A bruised spot, a bite out of one side? What details are important to your story? Use only the details that matter to the scene you are describing. If you were describing the apple the wicked stepmother offers Snow White, think of the sensory details that would make the reader believe that Snow White would take it, despite her distrust of this strange woman at her door. It's shiny red colour? It's sweet aroma? Would Snow White care that it's so big the woman must stretch her fingers to hold it? Would she notice that right at the bottom is a tiny brown spot? The writer chooses one or two details that sum up for the reader this object's importance in the story.

VERBS

Verbs are the strongest words in the sentence. The action they express drives the sentence forward. They are also good descriptive words. At important moments, the verb should express both action and emotion.

- Which is more evocative?

  She ran OR She darted, skipped, streaked, bounded

  He said OR He murmured, hissed, boomed, snarled

She *ran* is a perfectly fine way of letting the reader **see** the character moving quickly. But there are times when you want the reader to know how she ran - what emotion was sending her down the street. If she's happy you might choose *skipped*. *Streaked* suggests she's afraid - perhaps even running for her life. *Bounded* gives more a sense of the type of girl she is - big and galumphing. A carefully chosen verb can create a complete picture - action plus emotion.

Think about the synonyms for he said. What emotion does *murmured* suggest?

Murmuring is a soft sound, probably with love in it - mother to child, loved one to loved one. Now change it to *mutter*, a quiet, but no longer a soft sound. Can you hear the harshness in the "t"s?- the undertone of anger or bitterness? Replace *mutter* with *hissed*. The speaker is still being careful not to be heard by the whole room but listen to how much more intense the anger is in hissed than in muttered.

When choosing a replacement for *said*, think about volume as well as emotion. As we've seen, people can be speaking quietly and still express intense emotion. You can make a sliding scale of words that suggests not only differing volume but also pitch. *Roar* and *bellow* are deep sounds; screech and shriek are high-pitched sounds. Think yourself into your character's situation so that you can choose a verb that expresses the exact pitch and volume you need to express the underlying emotion.

On the other hand, you don't want to fall into the trap of overusing vivid verbs. A page of dialogue that has every character hissing and snarling and booming will soon tire the reader. Such words will lose not only their intensity but also their meaning. In the reader's mind, they'll revert back to being he said/she said. For maximum impact, save the vivid verbs for important moments in the story.

Using Description Effectively

There's more to effective description than choosing the right words. You also need to know why you are describing this person, place or thing. Useful description moves the story forward by doing one or more of :

- creating atmosphere,
- setting the scene,
- revealing character
- introducing an important idea or object.

Good description doesn't stand apart from the narrative; it is woven into the action and dialogue. Be careful not to overuse descriptive words. A few details can give us all we need to picture a person or place or feel the atmosphere. For example, in the following paragraph, notice how details of the setting - the crystal bowl full of fruit sitting on the table - create an image of part of the room at the same time as they add to the forward-moving action of the story:

"What can I use?" Her eye caught the shiny red of an apple. She snatched it off the pyramid of fruit that sat in the crystal bowl on the table. "Nice and heavy," she thought, weighing it in her hand. "Nice and hard." She hurled it across the room. With a satisfying thwack, it hit the back of her enemy's head.

Notice also how the description of the apple grows out of the needs of the scene. Because it is to be used as a weapon, what the reader needs to know is that the apple is both hard and heavy. All other details are immaterial except for its redness which is what catches the character's attention.

Remember, the role of description is to anchor your story in a concrete world (whether real or fantasy). ◎

Creating Backgrounds

Your story can be set in the present, the past, the future or in an invented fantasy world. For all these backgrounds, you will need to do some research.

Research

The idea of research can be daunting. How much do you need to know about a place, a procedure or an object to sound convincing? Suppose your character finally fulfils a long-held wish to try out a motorcycle. You certainly need to know how heavy the machine will feel to a person his age, how comfortable he feels sitting on it, what sensations he'll feel as it roars to life, what smells (leather, oil) he's aware of. You probably don't need to know all the ins and outs of the care and maintenance of a motorcycle.

To make yourself familiar with the broad outlines of your subject start with general research about the background of your story, whether it's a contemporary but exotic setting, an historical incident or scientific information needed to create a future world. As you read, keep in mind the story you want to tell. Look for details in the research that could take your story in unusual and interesting directions. Make notes about these possibilities and use the notes to guide the next phase of your research.

Phase two of your research grows out of the story itself. As you start to write the story, you will discover small details you need to know: how a machine works, the distance from one village to the next, what kind of bicycle popular in a particular year. Look up these specific details as they occur in the story. If you think too far ahead, you will end up with stacks of research and - the real danger here - a great desire to stuff it all into the story. In phase one, read enough to give you a good sense of the world you are trying to recreate. Let the need to find out about specific details grow out of the story itself.

Finding Help

1. Your first stop is the library: Check the catalogue for general titles about your subject. The table of contents and the index will give you a quick idea of how useful each book will be. The bibliography is a goldmine of further sources to check.

2. The reference librarian can guide you through special collections and vertical files. She can also suggest other resources such as archival collections. The federal and provincial archives provide historical information. Many companies and organizations also have archives.

3. The Internet may be helpful, but be wary. Some information on the Internet is unreliable. Look for specialized websites by reputable organizations and bibliographies that will speed up your library search.

4. Specialists in your area of interest may be willing to be interviewed. They will be more willing if you think your questions out ahead of time and agree to a time limit on the interview. ◎

You don't have to read all 600 pages of a reference book to find the material you need. Start by checking the Table of Contents. A chapter may zoom in on your particular topic. Then check the index for key words to see if useful material shows up on a few pages. If the book looks generally interesting, read the introduction, where the writer will tell you what he's going to tell you in much more detail later on. Then read the last chapter, which is usually a summary of the basic ideas covered. Always check the bibliography to find more specialized books about your subject. Those five areas often contain all you need from a particular book.

Organizing Your Notes

1. Use a system to keep track of the information. Two possiblities are:

   - Index cards. This allows you to keep information sorted alphabetically by topic no matter how many different sources you've consulted. Write clearly, in ink, so that months from now you can still decipher the information.

   - Three-ring binders. Photocopy pages with useful information, highlight the pertinent facts, then file the pages under topic headings. This gives you a quick reference file without the time spent copying out the needed information.

2. Keep track of your sources.

   - Note down page number, book title and author, book location (library, friend, own shelves) for each piece of information. Halfway through a project, you may need additional information from that source. Even more important, your editor may ask for proof of an historical fact months, even years after you did your research. Nothing is more frustrating than having to go through all your sources to confirm one small detail.

   - Check each book's bibliography. The sources the author consulted can lead you farther into your specific topic.

Contemporary Backgrounds

Too many writers think that contemporary novels don't need research, but that's a naïve view. No writer can be an expert about every activity that their characters may be involved in -- how to survive a plane crash, what it's like to work at McDonald's, how it feels to drive a Formula One racer, just to name a few.

In order to make these backgrounds believable, you'll have to do research. Start with the Internet, magazines and the library, especially for odd details such as the make of bike used for rough terrain racing or movies that your character might have seen in a particular year. But to make unusual contemporary backgrounds believable, the best approach is to interview people who know the situation. When you tell them you're working on a book for young people, you'll find many experts are very cooperative. They will give you stories, personal experiences and sometimes loan photographs that will be valuable for your book.

Historical Backgrounds

To bring a period or an historical event to life, you need to research both daily life and specific events. Even though your characters are about to be plunged into extraordinary events, you need to know what they would do on a normal day. From the moment they get up until they go to bed, how do they dress, prepare food, what do they work at and how do they do that, what do they think about, what ideas are important to them. Once you have a feel for the details (particularly the sensory details) of their everyday life, you can "dress up" your narrative with details that will make the background seem realistic to the reader.

If your story includes one or more historical events, first read a general history to get an overall picture of what happened. Then zoom in on the particular moment when your story takes place. Perhaps out of the whole War of 1812, you are going to concentrate on the Battle of Crysler's Farm. Your protagonist lives just down the road and becomes intimately involved. You need to know, minute by minute, what happened before, during and after the battle. What's more - and this is the important part - you need to know these details from the point-of-view of someone who was there.

Historians stand back and view the event objectively. Novelists get involved at the subjective participant's level. To find out these details, you need to read the letters, journals and diaries of actual participants. Their attitudes, thoughts and actions will give you the type of intimate details that bring historical fiction alive.

Science/Fanstasy Backgrounds

To create realistic Science/Fantasy backgrounds, you also need a sense of the characters' daily life as well as the chronological movement of events in the particular situation. The difference is that in Science Fiction/ Fantasy you, the writer, make them up. In both cases, you create parallel worlds. But once you have created the world, your characters must live in it as though it is as real as the world around us.

Documenting the Parallel Universe

To make sure they don't stray outside the bounds of their created worlds, many science/fantasy writers begin by writing their "bible." Just as for a researched historical background, they make notes about the way people in this invented world dress, eat, work, play as well as listing suitable names for people and places and possibly specialized vocabulary. If it's appropriate to the particular fantasy, they make up a mythology and a past history for their world. If magic is involved, they document how the magic works and, equally important, the conditions under which it won't work. This set of notes (constantly added to during the writing process) becomes their guide for keeping their characters' speech and actions consistent throughout the story. A fantasy or a future world has to be as believable as the real world or the reader will be frustrated and, finally, annoyed by the story.

Recommended Reading in Historical Fiction

Clark, Joan, *The Dream Carvers*, (Toronto: Puffin, 1997)

Greenwood, Barbara, *Spy In The Shadows* (Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1990)

Paterson, Katherine, *Lyddie* (New York: Lodestar Books, 1991)

Temple, Frances, *The Ramsey Scallop* (HarperTrophy, 1994)

Yee, Paul, *Ghost Train*, illus. Harvey Chan (Toronto, Groundwood, 1996)

Recommended Reading in Science Fiction/Fantasy

Cooper, Susan, *The Boggart* (New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 1995)

Katz, Welwyn Wilton, *Come Like Shadows* (Toronto: Puffin, 1995)

Hughes, Monica, *The Keeper of the Isis Light* (Toronto: Tundra, 2000)

McNaughton, Janet, *The Secret Under My Skin* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2000)

Oppel, Kenneth, *Silverwing* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1997) ◎

Who Reads Historical Fiction?

Historical fiction that centres on an historical event (the Riel Rebellion, the Expulsion of the Acadians) is usually written for children 10 and up. By that age, psychologists tell us, children have a sense of past times and are also able to follow the political reasons for a situation.

For younger children, historical fiction usually centres on family life. Good examples are Barbara Greenwood's A Pioneer Story, Laura Ingall Wilder's Little House on the Prairies or Patricia MacLachlan's Sarah, Plain and Tall. These stories can take the form of novels or picture books.

Brainstorming to Find Your Story Idea

Where do ideas come from?

Writers are constantly asked this question. The answer is: ideas are everywhere. Writers observe, listen, read - and see endless story possibilities in such daily life incidents as a daughter's accident in gym class, a son's struggles to learn canoeing, or a street fight broken up by neighbouring fathers. The real question is: how do you turn these ideas into stories that work?

Think of these happenings, events or observations as lumps of clay. For the potter to create a useful object, she has to know how to work the potter's wheel and how to manipulate the clay while it's spinning on the wheel. To turn your idea into a story, you, too, need to know how to shape the material. And remember, not every idea a writer has turns into a good story. Some are too slight but may, if left in the story file, incubate into a more workable idea. Better still, one idea in the story file may combine with another to create a real story possibility. To test an idea to see if it has story possibilities, try asking yourself a series of questions.

Think your way into your story

Ask yourself questions to get your imagination working:

What **kind of story** do I want to write?

- adventure, mystery, historical, science fiction, contemporary life?
- for what age group? This will determine the length and complexity of the story.

What **background** interests me?

- think about your own interests and what types of books you like to read. Your reading often gives you a clue to what you would enjoy writing.
- Any activity you know well (or any you are willing to research) can become a good background. Here are some: camping, junior hockey, ballet lessons, school.

What **problem** might a person face in this setting? Remember: the reader needs to **care**, so the problem must be challenging and intriguing. For example:

- A girl discovers someone has been doping a horse she is to ride in an important race. She suspects her boyfriend.
- A boy who plays practical jokes is told by the coach he has one more week to shape up or he's out of hockey camp; then a so-called friend lures him into one more prank.

You may think of several problems your character might encounter in a particular setting. Choose the most intriguing one or find a way to include several others as subplots.

Who will the **protagonist** be?

- **Personality** - One way to get conflict into the story is to create a person who will have to struggle to overcome weaknesses to solve the problem.
- **Motivation** - What need or desire is driving your protagonist?
- **Background** - Write yourself notes about this person's family and friends. What has happened in the past that might predict how he'll act in this situation?

Note down all the ideas that occur to you as answers to these questions. Then give yourself time to think about your story. Let your characters walk around in your imagination talking to each other.

Before you start to write, make sure you have interesting answers to the three questions that must be answered at the beginning of a story:

- WHERE - the background and setting
- WHAT - the conflict or problem your character will face
- WHO - what kind of person would find himself facing this problem; what is he going to do about it? ◎

Plotting

Inexperienced writers often feel nervous about plotting. There is no need. A "plot" is just a series of actions and events that ultimately lead to a moment of insight for the protagonist. Or it might make more sense to you to think of plot as the way your protagonist moves through a series of obstacles (that are linked in some meaningful way) toward a goal. Or think of it this way: at the beginning of the story the writer sets up a problem. The plot is basically the protagonist's attempts to solve the problem.

Writing the First Page

You've answered the three "story starting" questions in your brainstorming session. You know WHO, WHERE and WHAT. Now you need to know WHEN. At what moment in your protagonist's life are you going to jump in and start the story? As soon as you begin asking yourself questions about the protagonist and antagonist, they become human beings with personality traits and past lives. How much of a 10 or 15-year-old's life history does the reader need to know at the start of the story? Almost none. Rather, the reader wants to know: is anything exciting going to happen here? Is it worth my while to turn the page? To make sure the reader's answer is "yes," start the story in the middle of action, at a moment when the protagonist is about to step into the situation that will drive the plot forward. Notice what an energetic word "drive" is. Your protagonist's problem must be equally energetic because it must carry the story forward decisively from the first page to the last.

British children's novelist, Jill Paton Walsh (author of *A Parcel of Patterns and A Chance Child*) thinks of the protagonist's problem as a flung ball. Once thrown, it arcs up and over, driving toward the climactic moment - the moment when the protagonist recognizes what he must do - and then begins an abrupt descent as he takes action to solve the problem. The important thing to notice about both the flung ball and the well-constructed plot is that neither wavers from its trajectory. Once launched, both follow paths that lead inevitably toward the resolution.

Traditional Plot Line

1. Beginning (introduction of protagonist, setting and problem)
2. Complications rising to -
3. Climax (or breaking point) followed by
4. Turn or twist leading to -
5. Resolution.

So, open the story with a scene in which your character is in the middle of action that will lead to her first recognition of the problem. Katherine Paterson's *Lyddie* opens at the very moment when a bear invades her family's log cabin. In the midst of the tense scene, as Lyddie calms her siblings and coaxes them and her mother (who is on the verge of hysteria) up the ladder to the loft, Lyddie realizes that her mother's fragile mental health has finally broken and that she, Lyddie, must take charge of the family. By the time the family is safely in the loft and the bear has shuffled off, the reader has learned that their father has deserted them, the family is nearly destitute and that Lyddie has nothing but sheer grit to help her confront her problem. Even more important, the reader has been hooked by this gripping scene into caring about Lyddie's plight.

The right opening moment for your story need not be as dramatic as confronting a bear, but it should involve the reader immediately in action that demonstrates one of the protagonist's defining character traits and begins to outline the problem she faces.

Creating Suspense

As the story moves forward, scene by dramatized scene, tension should escalate until the suspense is almost unbearable and the reader is dying to know: What is going to happen to these characters?

There are two ways to create tension. In one type of book, the unexpected is forever popping out of the bushes to startle/terrify/horrify the protagonist. In this type of story the protagonist is a passive magnet for disasters. This is the stuff of Hollywood B movies and poorly-written fiction.

A more effective way to create suspense is through the use of character development. Suppose you have set up a situation in which your character needs or wants something important - to be team goalie for his peewee team, perhaps. He knows his skills aren't as good as a couple of the other players and he has a secret fear - when the puck is flying at him, he wants to duck. But to please his dad, he has to be goalie. Perhaps in the first scene of your story, the protagonist shows weakness. He backs down when another candidate for goalie - the team bully - threatens him. At this point the reader knows both his dream and his weakness. The suspense in the story is created as the reader wonders how the boy will react, what choices he will make as he tries to achieve his goal. When suspense is linked to character development, every twist and turn in the plot depends on what the protagonist chooses to do at each key moment. This makes the protagonist - no matter whether his basic personality is timid or bold - the active ingredient in moving the story forward. It also makes the reader care about the protagonist and agonize over what he is going to do next.

The plot is a series of events in which the protagonist makes choices. Two words to remember:

- sequence -- one thing happens after another
- causality - one thing happens because of another

In a well-constructed plot, one event should lead to, or cause, the next event.

Pacing

In stories, as in music, time is elastic. There are moments when the story must move quickly and others when the action needs to slow down. This is called pacing and writers need to be sensitive to the story's need for varying rhythms.

Slowing down

Some stories, particularly adventure stories, can move at a breathless pace as the protagonist hurls himself at one obstacle after another. But too much of this not only tires the reader, it actually detracts from the excitement. If every scene races by at a frantic clip, it's hard for the reader to feel surges of excitement as the tension rises. To allow the reader to catch her breath before the next onslaught, you need to find places to work in quiet scenes. Perhaps it's time for the protagonist to reflect on what's been going on or perhaps a subplot can bring in a bit of humour or add a quiet moment. A lull in the action does not mean that nothing important is happening; the protagonist may well discover something through quiet that he would have missed in the midst of action. But the lull does provide much needed contrast so the reader can appreciate the action when it starts up again.

The Climax

Slowing down the action works not only for moments of calm, but also as lead-ins to important moments in the story - particularly as the story is building toward a climactic moment. Most stories, particularly those in picture books, move fairly quickly through the various attempts of the protagonist to solve the problem. Then comes the moment when the main character has a moment of insight and finally understands what's been going on. Now he has to take action that will solve his problem once and for all. Don't rush through this moment. This is what the reader has been waiting for, looking forward to, anticipating with bated breath. The reader wants to live every moment of this final attempt to triumph over adversity.

Good pacing in the climactic scene is crucial to reader satisfaction. Often it is best to slow the action right down. Show the protagonist's every thought, impulse, action, step-by-step, second-by-second. Notice in the following scene how completely the reader is inside the protagonist's body, experiencing every second of his wait.

He ducked behind the tree, his heart beating so loudly in his ears that it blotted out the evening sounds. Calm down, he told his quaking body, as he sucked in a shaky breath. Pale moonlight lit the path ahead. That's the way they'd come. They had no other choice. This time he had them. He gripped the axe. One sweaty hand slid up the handle. He rubbed it dry on his shorts. He wasn't making any mistakes this time. Not this time. Far off he heard a crunching sound. A boat running up the pebbly beach. This is it, he thought.

Rather than simply saying "He waited nervously..." the writer dramatizes the scene - takes the reader inside the experience where the reader can live vicariously through that tense situation. As a result, the reader is far more caught up in the story than when the writer simply reports on what was done.

Pacing, developing a sense for when to slow down and when to speed up, can make the difference between a book that children will enjoy and recommend to friends and a book that sits half-finished until mom throws it out.

Chapter Techniques

To create a novel, a forward-moving narrative is divided into shorter chunks, or chapters. These are not arbitrary divisions. Each chapter represents the next question being asked about the dilemma or problem around which the story revolves. For example, if chapter 4 shows Mary discovering her older sister's stash of

cigarettes hidden in a drawer, chapter 5 might deal with the question, will Mary tell her mother or will she use the information to blackmail her sister into helping her (Mary) do something neither is supposed to do?

You can think of succeeding chapters as the next scene in a play. Each new scene deals with new subject matter or a new development in a previous subject. Chapters for younger readers usually have only one scene but intermediate or young adult novels can have two scenes usually linked by subject.

Shaping the Chapter

Each chapter mimics the shape of the story as a whole: it has a beginning, middle and ending. At the start the reader needs to know where this scene takes place, who the main characters are and what the scene is about. The middle follows the rising action until the protagonist has learned whatever information he needs to carry on with the story. But the ending of the chapter, rather than coming to a final conclusion, points toward the next action or the next question that must be answered. A sentence such as "Now there was only one person left for me to deal with," concludes one action and sets up expectations for the next action. It urges the reader to keep on reading.

Adventure stories often use "cliffhanger" endings to maintain tension. As the chapter ends the main character seems to have solved a problem or evaded a trap. Then in the last paragraph the writer throws a curve. Perhaps as the character turns away from trouble, taking a long, relieved breath, he sees coming towards him the one person who can put him in danger. Tim Wynne-Jones ends one chapter of *The Boy In the Burning House* with "At the door stood Father Fisher with a rifle in his hands ... The rifle was aimed at Jim." The implications of this scene make the reader's heart stand still, but also make him anxious to read on. In this case, Jim has to face Father Fisher in the next chapter. In some stories, the writer will cut away to another group of characters, leaving the reader in suspense about the first character's fate for one or more chapters. This kind of "teasing" is an effective way to rachet up suspense in fast-moving plots.

Length and Variations

Most novels for children have chapters of roughly equal length. For various reasons of form and style, books differ in length and organization but here are some basic guidelines:

- **Chapter books** - 60-80 pages
  - 8-12 chapters with 3-4 pages each of text
  - plus 1 full-page illustration
  - about 600 - 800 words per chapter
- **Intermediate and YA novels** - 120-200 pages
  - 12-15 chapters with roughly 12 pages each
  - about 1500-3000 words per chapter

However, sometimes a story needs a different structure; 25 or 30 very short chapters or alternating long and short chapters are two possibilities. Kevin Crossley-Holland's Arthurian fantasy, *The Seeing Stone*, has 100 short chapters (many only one page long) that act as snapshots of medieval life. In *I Was A Rat*, Philip Pullman alternates one-page chapters (telling his variation of the Cinderella story) with longer chapters (that tell of the adventures of the rat who was changed into her page on the night of the ball. Don't be afraid to play around with chapter length, especially if you have two parallel storylines that need different treatments.

Endings

The ending is the calm after the storm. It shows the reader that the protagonist understands what she has learned from the events of the story or has come to terms with a difficult situation. It should point to a future in which she is able to make use of this knowledge. It need not (probably should not) give the feeling that everyone lives happily ever after. In dealing honestly with readers, writers for children need to show that life is seldom perfect. It can, however, be better. The older your probable reader, the more bittersweet the ending can be (If that is appropriate to the type of story), but writers for children should never close the door on hope. Childhood, even for adolescents, is about the future. Leave them with the feeling that, yes, the protagonist has been through difficult times but she's stronger now and is going to be able to cope.

This revelation should take the form of a short scene in which we see the protagonist using her new-found skills or insight. You need to find a concrete way to make the theme - the underlying meaning of the story - explicit. At the end of Katherine Paterson's *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, Gilly is devastated to learn that the mother she has yearned for, the mother who put her in foster care, is still selfish and uncaring. But after an agitated telephone conversation with Trotter, her beloved foster mother, Gilly splashes cold water on her face, squares her shoulders, tacks on a smile and goes out to face her grandmother. She is about to put into action what Trotter has taught her about love. ◎

Plots can be reduced to three basic shapes:

1. The journey or quest:

The protagonist sets out on a journey in quest of some important object or objective. The story consists of the obstacles he overcomes along the way. This can be an adventure story where the obstacles are physical (J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*) or - for older readers - a psychological story where the obstacles are emotional (Beth Goobie's *Before Wings*). Often both physical and emotional obstacles are present.

2. The stranger comes to town:

In this type of story a community is disrupted when a stranger comes to town and upsets the status quo. This can range from a story for preschoolers about learning to accommodate the new baby to a YA horror/adventure story about a mysterious stranger who physically or emotionally endangers a closed community as in Arthur Slade's *Dust.*

3. The love story:

This can range from a preschooler and her toys to a YA romance. In each case, the protagonists must gradually overcome obstacles that stand in the way of romance. An example of this is Robin McKinley's *Beauty.*

Revising

Completing your first draft is nearly the end of the writing process. A writing project has three major stages:

- **The EUREKA! stage:** This is when you realize a great story idea has walked into your head. At this stage the story is part gut feeling, part amorphous vision.
- **Getting it down on paper :** This is when that great vision behaves like mercury poured on a table - very hard to get hold of. But finally you finish the last page. Then it's time to face:
- **The moment of second sober thought:** when you test the reality of the first draft against your original shining vision and realize, with a sinking sensation, that the two don't quite match. Fear not. This is no time for despair. Re-writing is an exciting and creative act that will bring your finished text much closer to your original concept.

How To Revise

Take "revision" apart and look at its root meaning. Re vision - looking again - getting back in touch with the original concept. That's what you now have time to do. You have a complete draft of the story; you know how everything works out; your mind is now free to shape and polish.

Before you can revise creatively, you have to clear your mind. When you finish writing your first draft, your head is still filled, not only with the final story, but also with all the might-have-beens - details, pieces of dialogue, bits of action that you thought about putting into the story but rejected. To rid your mind of this confusing detritus, you have to distance yourself from the first draft. Put it in a drawer for as long as you can manage - at least a week, preferably a month. Let life come between you and your story. Once you have cooled down from the heat of writing - half forgotten what your characters have been up to - you're ready to take an objective look at the manuscript.

Story Editing

Begin by reading straight through your story just the way your readers are going to. This will give you a sense of how all the building blocks of the story are working together. Mark with coloured stickies any scenes that are causing problems. The following points will help you analyze your story.

Look at the:

- **architecture of the story** -- How does the story line arc through the beginning, middle and end? Can the reader feel the parabola of the flung ball? Does it deviate and wobble or fly straight. Is there an arc to the physical story as well as an arc to the emotional story?
- **characters** - Is the protagonist the person who takes action and eventually solves the problem? Is the antagonist a strong and interesting blocking character? Is each character "felt" through voice , body language and (for protagonist) thoughts? Does each event happen because of how the protagonist has acted or reacted or because it has been imposed on him? Does the protagonist have clearly-evoked moments of insight at important junctures in his journey?
- **pacing** - Can the reader sense the narrative speeding up and slowing down according to the needs of the story?

- **style** - Is every paragraph/scene/chapter shaped and focussed to a useful end? Have you used concrete images? Are important moments dramatized?
- **theme** -- Now that the story exists, you should be aware of the underlying idea the story exemplifies. How can you highlight this? Are there any images or symbols that might help make connections? Can they be played up? Or have some been overused?
- **unity** -- Does every scene and every detail of every scene contribute to a single, total impression? Does every scene contribute several things at the same time (character revelation, plot movement, setting). What scenes do not move the story forward? Can they be saved or should they be thrown out?

How to Re-Write

By the time you've worked your way through the manuscript you will have made notes and marked scenes that need a second look. As you start to re-write, keep these tips in mind:

- Is your first sentence/scene still the best one - or did you find a better one later in the work? Often writers find they can throw out the first scene - even the first chapter - and start with a more compelling situation that occurs later in the story. Remember the opening words of ***Charlotte's Web***? "Where's Papa going with that axe?" That scene came to E.B.White very late in the rewriting process.
- Do you need a completely different opening scene? Without looking again at the original, rewrite the beginning. Now that you know what the story is about, you may well come up with a much stronger opening scene.
- Don't be afraid to move scenes around. A scene from Chapter Five, say, may have important things to add to a scene in Chapter Three. Juxtaposing them in one chapter may strengthen and sharpen a point you're trying to make.
- If playing around with a scene is simply making more of a mess, start again. Retype allowing your imagination to give you new words, new sentence structures, new action if needed.
- Does the ending feel right? At the revision stage, many of your decisions will be made on gut feeling. The part of you that has become a professional writer will niggle away at you. If that little voice is saying, "Something doesn't feel right here," listen to it. The ending has to be psychologically satisfying. Ask yourself: Since the protagonist has changed and grown over the course of the story, is this the way he'd act at the end? Or is his seeming understanding of the problem too mature for his age? Is there a simple action that would show the reader that at some level the protagonist has learned from what has happened? The ending will stick with your readers long after they've forgotten the middle, so you want to get it right.

How many drafts is enough?

When you've finished a second draft, put it away for a few days or a week. Work on something else. Then

read it out loud and go through the whole evaluation process again. You must be willing to write three, four or five drafts. Each time you'll find you have a deeper understanding of the story, of the characters and of the theme. Once you feel the story is as polished as you can make it, it's time to send it off to a publisher. And don't worry - the revising process isn't over yet. Once an editor starts asking questions, you'll find yourself deep in another draft. Then why am I spending all this time now? you ask. Good question, to which there is a two-pronged answer.

First, experienced writers know that the first draft is a mere skeleton of possibilities. It is in re-thinking the idea draft by draft that they are able to put flesh on the skeleton. Also, for an unpublished writer, to interest a publisher, your manuscript must be of extraordinary quality. The publisher won't take the financial risk of publishing a book unless the story is nearly perfect.

No professional writer would ever submit to a publisher a manuscript that isn't the best she can make it. As with any craftperson, her professional reputation rests on the quality of her writing. So, carry on with the next phase of the revision.

Sentence Editing

As well as analyzing the structure of the story, you need to look at the structure of every sentence and paragraph. Read sections out loud. Let your ear tell you if this is the most lucid and compelling way to make your point. You also need to think about the age of your probable reader. Does each sentence and paragraph make sense for a particular age level? If the story is for beginning readers, is the sentence structure uncomplicated enough?

Some writers test their work on children who are the age of their projected reader. If you have a child the right age for the book, ask her to read or listen to you read. The questions and comments she makes afterwards may point out places where the story works and also places where it is hard to follow. For a larger audience you might ask the local school if you can read to a class one afternoon. Listen for the reactions. A laugh in the right place will show you have indeed written a funny scene. Shuffling feet will tell you that a particular scene didn't hold their attention. Children are not infallible critics. Most are polite enough to want to please you. It's their inadvertent reactions that will give you the most valuable feedback.

Good Sentences

A good sentence should

- present information clearly.

  The girl ran down the street and around the corner.

- point toward the next sentence or lead away from the previous one.

  There she saw the very thing she was looking for. It had rolled ...

- use word and phrase order to emphasize the important information in the sentence.

  Down the street and around the corner she ran. Gasping for breath, the girl leaned against the light standard. At last, the very thing she had hoped to find...

Testing your Writing

Read the sentence out loud. Does it flow easily or does it tangle your tongue? Can you combine the ideas in several short sentences to make an interesting long one? Can you break up an overly long sentence to make sentences with more impact? Can you say the same thing in fewer words? Do you need more words to clarify the idea?

Now look at each paragraph. How many words can you remove from the paragraph and still keep the

picture? Does each paragraph contain a balance of long and short sentences? Do you have a good reason for using a long or short sentence in a particular place in the paragraph? A short sentence is often used to sum up a point at the end of the paragraph.

Be ruthless. The easiest way to fix a bad sentence is to delete it. Often you find the paragraph makes more sense without it.

After the Manuscript Has Been Edited

Eventually there will come a day when you receive a letter from a publishing house accepting your story. After the euphoria wears off, you'll find that working with an editor means writing another draft. This is not a bad thing. The editor represents your first intelligent reader. She brings a mind clear of all the revisions you have been through. She can see the manuscript from a fresh perspective. The fact that you've been offered a contract means the publisher has confidence in your story. Now you and the editor both want this to be the best story you are capable of producing. ◎

Revision is an on-going process. Most writers revise as they go along—some at the end of a day's work, others at the end of each chapter. Others wait until they have a complete first draft.

One way is not better than another. Experiment and decide which best suits your writing style. No matter how much you revise en route, you still need to do a major evaluation and revison when you have a complete draft. It's only then that you can see the story as a whole.

Types of Editing

SUBSTANTIVE - comments on story structure, flow and character consistency

LINE - works to improve writing sentence by sentence

COPY EDITING - checks spelling, punctuation, consistency to bring in line with house style

Check Your Story Structure

Keep this check list beside you as you re-read. Does your story answer these key questions?

Plotting

- What is your story question (or problem, conflict, struggle)?
- Does it become apparent early in the story? - through action?
- Does the story focus on the question?
- Does the ending answer the question?
- Look at the secondary story questions. Do they enrich or confuse the storyline?
- Does each scene or chapter contain a challenge for the viewpoint character?
- Does each scene or chapter move the story forward?

Characters

- Have you revealed essential personality traits for each character through action, dialogue (and thoughts of point-of-view character)?
- Read the dialogue out loud. Does each character have a distinct voice? Does the dialogue sound natural?
- Physical description - too much or too little?
- Does every character have a part to play in moving the story forward?

- Names: Are they sufficiently different to be easily remembered?
- Consistency: Does each character act throughout in accordance with his/her revealed personality traits? Does the viewpoint character change believably over the course of the story?

Motivation

- Have you used action and thoughts to reveal WHY your character wants what he/she wants or WHY he/she is behaving in a particular way?

Viewpoint

- Have you included the direct thoughts and feelings of the viewpoint character?
- Is the viewpoint character always active, striving, changing?
- Check to make sure you haven't strayed into the minds on non-viewpoint characters.
- If you have more than one viewpoint character, is this improving or confusing the storyline?

Check Your Writing

Read a page out loud. Listen for:

- repetition (words, phrases, sentence structure)
- awkward sentences
- inadvertent rhyming
- lack of clarity

Challenge every:

- verb

- Is it active, not passive?
- Does it contain action AND emotion? (e.g. instead of ran would dashed, or fled show how and why the character was running?)
- Does it suggest sensual imagery?

- adverb

- often weakens the verb

- adjective

- may weaken the noun
- should evoke one of the 5 senses
- should be concrete, not abstract (tall, red flower, not beautiful flower)

Check your description:

- Is it embedded in the action or does it stand alone in long, dense paragraphs?
- Does it follow a logical path from the general to the particular?

Cut non-essential dialogue tags.

- Use other methods (e.g. action or having one character call another by name) to identify the speaker.

Check for sentence variety

- Count to see if too many sentences on any given page begin subject/verb. Vary some to begin with subordinate clauses or phrases.
- Vary the sentence lengths.
- Think about breaking up any sentence over 20 words long.
- Occasionally use a short sentence to give a sharp, punchy ending to a paragraph.
- Have a good reason for using sentence fragments.
- Keep modifying phrases close to their subjects.
- Shift adverbial phrases around to vary the rhythm of a sentence.

Proofread for:

- clarity
- consistency
- grammar
- punctuation

Working With an Editor

The editor will start with substantive or structural editing. As the she reads the manuscript, she'll be looking for answers to such questions as:

- What does the protagonist want?
- How does he try to gain this?
- What does he achieve?
- How does he feel about what he's achieved?
- What does he know by the end that he didn't know at the beginning?
- How SUBTLY has all this been conveyed?

Then she'll write you a critique commenting on the overall flow of the story, tracking the development of the protagonist and pointing out any scenes where he seems out of character. She will detail out sections that seem fuzzy or weak and need to be rethought. She might suggest adding more material in some spots.

If the substantive editing doesn't call for a massive re-write the editor may, at the same time, do the sentence editing. Working with a pencil on the hard copy, she'll "mark up" (put comments on) any sentence that lacks clarity or logic and question any word that doesn't seem the most precise for the needs of a sentence. She may suggest how particularly difficult sentences could be improved. What she will not do, if she's a good editor, is re-write your sentence, paragraph or scene. That's your job.

The Writer's Side of the Bargain

As you read through the editor's critique, your first impulse may be to have a temper tantrum along the lines of "How could she not understand what I meant there? Any fool could see the point." Or, "That's my best image she wants to take out!" Once your outrage has cooled, look again at her suggestions (and remember they are just suggestions). Consider that she is trained to analyze and has had experience with a number of manuscripts, so she may well have a point. In fact, take a good hard look at any aspect of your story the editor comments on. Her solution for a particular problem may not appeal to you, but if something about the scene, action, piece of dialogue rang a warning bell, chances are good that there's a problem. So what do you do about it?

Remember back to when you were revising on your own. Put on that mantel of objectivity once again and re-read your story, this time with the editor's suggestions in mind. Is she right about the opening? Do you need to make it stronger? Is your protagonist behaving inconsistently in Chapter 5? Would the antagonist really say that in those circumstances?

Often the act of re-reading with the editor's critique beside you is all it takes to stimulate your imagination. Images, action, dialogue pour into your mind and you're off on what will probably be your final draft.

If you're truly stumped, call the editor and ask for a brainstorming session. Talking about the story with someone as committed as you are to making it the best story possible, often helps to unblock you.

Be aware of why the editor is asking for changes. Besides structural changes which are basically to make the story tighter and stronger, there may be technical reasons for some changes. In a picture book manuscript, the editor may ask you to delete text that will be duplicated by illustrations. Or she may ask you make an abstract idea concrete to give the illustrator something tangible to draw. For example, "Johnny was clever" is hard to draw. "Johnny made his own escape ladder," is not. Or she may point out that there are too many or too few visual scenes to fit the 32-page length. Novels, too,

may need shortening to fit the usual page counts for the various ages. Of course, the more you conform to these needs in your original manuscript, the fewer changes will be needed at this stage. See Chapters 5-8 for the specifics of stories for differing age groups.

If, after much thought, you disagree with the editor's suggestions (usually it will just be one or two points, not the entire critique), ask for a meeting to discuss it. This is your book and you have a right to be satisfied with the finished results. Discussing the points at issue will usually lead to a mutually satisfying solution.

Deadlines

Once you're working with an editor, your book is on the publisher's radar. The production staff will be slotting your title into their year's schedule. Everything that has to be done to the book from here on (copyediting, book design, cover illustration, printing, marketing) will be done to a series of deadlines. If even one of these deadlines is missed, you book may have to be bumped a season. This means that instead of having a book out this fall, you will have to wait until next fall.

You don't want to be the reason your book is bumped a season. Work out a reasonable deadline with your editor, then meet it. Make sure you deliver the rewritten manuscript on time and in the format asked for. This is usually one hard copy plus one copy on disc or e-mailed by attachment. Meeting deadlines is the mark of a professional writer.

Once you've met your deadlines you have nothing more to do—on this book—until a finished copy is in your hands. ◎