



Fiction Feedback

Tales for Tots: Top Ten Tips

Many people see writing children's stories as an easy way in – a hop, a skip and a jump into publication. Nothing could be further from the truth.

While writing for children can be delightful, rewarding and endlessly entertaining, it also has its own set of traps and pitfalls. To stop you from stumbling, and to make your path to publication as smooth as possible, here are Fiction Feedback's top ten tips on writing for children.

1. Study the market

Many new writers make the mistake of drawing inspiration from the stories they loved in their own childhoods. While it is true that there are some classics that stand the test of time, it is usually the way they are written, rather than their subject matter, that ensures they appeal to generation after generation of readers. It is the charm and whimsy of Beatrix Potter that makes her stories so irresistible, not the rabbits in waistcoats.

Today's readers are sophisticated and savvy, expecting their stories to offer something new and exciting in the way of subject matter, as well as a strong and engaging plot.

Study the market to see the sort of material that is popular with today's children – but at the same time, avoid jumping onto any bandwagons. J K Rowling has thoroughly exhausted the subject of boy wizards, at least for the next few years.

2. Establish the central problem as early as possible

To engage your reader's attention, your story must have a strong central problem. This could be anything from a character flaw (such as shyness) to an evil enemy (the wicked witch or ferocious dragon).

The important thing is that this problem should be established as early in the story as possible. Ideally, this should be in the first two or three pages of a picture book, and by the end of the first chapter in a novel for young adults.

If you can establish the story's central problem in the first sentence, all the better.

3. Good characters are active characters

Your central character should solve your central problem. Don't allow other characters to solve the problem for them, or hand-wave it away with a coincidence or convenient magical solution.

The interest in any good story lies in seeing the difficulties the character has to overcome to reach his Happily Ever After.

4. Good characters are a little bit bad

Your central character should have some flaws. That beautiful, perfect princess, who sings like a lark, dances like a dream, and is kind and charming and beloved by all? That handsome, clever, brave little boy, who is friends with everyone and never answers back? Not only will children not believe in them, they won't like them, either.

It is much easier for a child to identify with a character who sometimes trips over his shoelaces, or doesn't want to do his homework, or is shy, or stroppy, or refuses to clean his teeth.

5. POV

It is almost always best to write in the third person singular point of view when writing for young children, and to use the past tense: "Tom felt sad"; "The little frog hopped along"; "The wicked witch plotted Tom and frog soup".

When writing for young adults the first person can also be effective, but this can be confusing for younger readers, and is best attempted by more experienced writers.

6. Use humour

Humour is probably the most powerful weapon in your arsenal when it comes to winning over young readers.

Whether it is a gentle, old-fashioned whimsy; rough-and-tumble slapstick; or out-and-out toilet humour; children can't get enough of funny writing.

7. Read it out loud

Bear in mind that a lot of younger children's books will be read with a parent or carer, or may simply be read aloud to the child. Read your own work out loud, to make sure that it flows properly and doesn't sound stilted or awkward.

Reading your work aloud is also a good way to make sure that your sentences aren't too long and complicated for young readers. If you have to stop for breath half way through, you should probably simplify things or cut the sentence in two.

Does your dialogue sound natural? Reading aloud is the best way to be sure.

8. Show, don't tell

This is the most important piece of advice for any writer, whether they are writing for infants, children, teenagers or adults and whether they are writing westerns, fantasy, romance, horror or sci-fi.

Don't tell us that your character is frightened – show that he is frightened. His legs are wobbly, his palms are damp.

Don't tell us that your character is funny – show us that he is funny. Let him tell a joke or make a remark that will have the reader in stitches.

Don't tell us that it is a hot day – show us that it is a hot day. Your character can smell the hot tarmac and hear the sound of the ice cream van.

9. Avoid weak words

Children's stories are so short that every word has to count. Avoid weak words like was, were, had.

"The mouse was in his house" is not as interesting and does not paint such a vivid picture as "The mouse huddled in his house", and if the mouse *clutches* a piece of cheese rather than just *having* a piece of cheese, the scene is immediately more dynamic and interesting.

10. Writing is a job

If you are serious about writing professionally, commit yourself to acting professionally. That means that you should be courteous and accommodating when working with other professionals like editors, agents and illustrators. You should strive to meet deadlines and to complete the brief you have been given. And, frustrating as it can sometimes be, you should be prepared to make changes to your work if an editor asks you to. They know the market, and they know what is likely to sell.

Good luck, and happy writing!