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“Writing For Children: The Nuts & Bolts” Six Steps to Put You on the Road to Publication

1. First, determine what kind of children's book you wish to write and publish.

Kinds of Children's books

- a. **Board books:** These are hard-back books that are the perfect size for little hands—the kind that babies love to chew on. They are usually for the 0-3 year old age group, and they have very simple words, very few words and very simple pictures. Examples: “Why I Love You, God” and “What Is Christmas?” by Michelle Medlock Adams. There is sort of a sub-category to this one, too. Novelty books (ones where you pull a flap to reveal a picture or something) are often placed in the board book category. How long? 1-2 manuscript pages. Usually 16 pages or so when finished with artwork.
- b. **Picture books:** As the name indicates, picture books rely heavily on illustrations to help enhance the text. They are typically for young children 4-6 or possibly 6-8. Think preschool, kindergarten, first and second graders. These can be hardback or paperback. Examples: “Sister For Sale” by Michelle Medlock Adams and “Goodnight Moon” by Margaret Wise. This is by far the most crowded category in all of children's books—but not impossible to break into. How long? Usually 6 to 9 manuscript pages which will translate into 24 or 32 page picture books or 12 or 15 spreads. Occasionally, you'll see a 48-page picture book, especially for folktales or fairytales.
- c. **Easy-to-Reads:** These are written for the beginning reader to help him/her develop skills to read alone. These books have simple vocabulary. (Check out the Children's Word Book to find out if a word is appropriate or not.) These can soft cover or hardback. An example would be “Tiny the Snow Dog” put out by Viking. First grade level 6-8. How long? Usually 10 to 20 manuscript pages.
- d. **Middle-Grade Readers (chapter books):** These have longer text, usually in chapter form, with just a few black-and-white drawings. Chris' books: “Reality Shift” and “Double Take” would be considered chapter books. Again, these can be soft back or hardback. Many times, chapter books will have an entire series. These are appropriate for ages 8-12. How long? Usually 40 to 128 pages. This category has quite a variance. The typical range is 35-65 pages for a chapter book, 45-90 for a low-middle-grade, 90-120 for a middle-grade, 150-200 for a young, young adult, but these are just averages

- e. **Young Adult Novels:** These are more sophisticated in content and are written for teens, addressing teen topics. Usually only illustrations on jacket of book. They can be soft cover or hardback. Some publishers break this category into two sub-categories with one for 10-12 year olds (tweens) and another for readers 12 and up. How long? About 175-200 manuscript pages.

QUICK TIP: Let your main character guide you when determining which of the above categories is a good fit for your story. For example, if your main character is a squirrel, you probably have a board book or picture book manuscript—not a teen novel. Make sense?

Fiction versus Non-fiction books

- a. **Fiction:** I would say 90 percent of all people who set out to write children's books desire to write fiction and that's OK. Making up stories that will take children to new worlds and different time periods is a fun thing to do! From talking animal stories to sci-fi adventures, making your fiction exciting and engaging is a worthy venture.
- b. **Non-fiction:** Because so many writers desire to be published in the fiction realm, this is a wide-open market and a great place for beginning writers to get their feet wet. So, if you specialize in a topic such as fitness or nutrition or science or history, why not put that knowledge/specialization to work for you? For example, I have a friend who graduated with a Food Science/Nutrition degree, and she writes educational (yet, still fun) children's non-fiction stories about the four food groups/eating healthy for an educational niche publisher that focuses mainly on health topics.

QUICK TIP: Dive headfirst into the Library Market. There are many library publishers such as Mitchell Lane Publishers—the one that I wrote six biographies for: (“Cleopatra” “Jamie Lynn Spears” “Tim McGraw” “Brandi Chastain” “Jessica Simpson” and “Kenny Chesney.”)

- Library Publishers:
 - They need many titles each year to fulfill their various series such as: Inventors and inventions, Ancient civilizations, contemporary biographies, Biographies of presidents, Weather and science books, The Importance Of..., etc.
 - They don't pay as much as other books, but writing a few titles for a library publisher will add publishing credits to your résumé.
 - Library publishers can often give you consistent work, too, which adds up over the long run.
 - They are often willing to take a risk on a new writer.
 - They have very specific guidelines, so it makes your job easier. Great place to “get your feet wet.”

- Once you've authored a library title or two, you can begin speaking at schools and selling your books while there. That can equal extra income!

- Heinemann-Raintree
100N. LaSalle, Suite 1200
Chicago, IL 60602
Hours: Mon - Fri, 9 to 5 CST
Phone: 312-324-5200
Fax: 312-324-5201

- Attn: Publisher - Lucent
15822 Bernardo Center Drive, Suite C
San Diego, CA 92127

- Barbara Mitchell
Mitchell Lane Publishers
PO Box 196
Hockessin, DE 19707
(302) 234-9426

- Enslow Publishers, Inc.
Box 398, 40 Industrial Road, Dept. F61
Berkeley Heights, NJ 07922-0398
Toll free telephone number: 1-800-398-2504
Phone: (908) 771-9400
Fax: (908) 771-0925

- Capstone Press
151 Good Counsel Dr.
PO Box 669
Mankato, MN 56002
(507)345-8100

- The Rosen Publishing Group
29 East 21st Street
New York, NY 10010
phone: (800) 237-9932
fax: (888) 436-4643

- Chelsea House
editorial@chelseahouse.com
<http://www.chelseahouse.com/c/@PDIfhSamS.zF2/Pages/editorial.html>

2. Next, find out what publishers publish the kind of children's book that you wish to write.

Hang out at Barnes & Noble, Borders, Family Christian Bookstores and your local library

- a. **Be an investigative reporter:** Find books similar to the one you wish to write (or have already written) and write down the publishers of those books. Also, jot down the book titles of those books that are similar to yours. So, if you've written a counting book called, "Counting Cows" (which I have done), record the publishers that put out a lot of concept books such as counting, abc books, etc.
- b. **Pour over Writers' Market Guides:** Your home bookshelves should contain copies of the current "Children's Writers and Illustrator's Market Guide" "Sally Stuart's Christian Writers' Market Guide" and "Writer's Digest Writer's Market Guide" (the big thick one). Why? So when you come home from your investigating adventure at Barnes & Noble, you can scan your various writers' market guides and find contact information for each of those publishers you jotted down. Those guides will tell you how to send your stories, where to send them, and who to send them to, as well.

QUICK TIP: *Industry newsletters and magazines will also provide insight on where to send your stories—letting you know what house is looking for what kind of books *right now!*

3. Now you're ready to market yourself and your story through cover letters and proposals and query letters!

Creating convincing cover letters and cool query letters...

- a. **Cover letter basics:** Keep it simple. Introduce yourself, mention other things you've published or a few appropriate credentials (NOT a résumé), include the title of the manuscript you're submitting and, if you wish, a very brief description ("a middle-grade novel about a boy who discovers his laptop has magical powers") and any special information ("an interactive nonfiction work that could include scratch-and-sniff panels"). Place the cover letter on top of your story and send it off with a SASE. Or, some publishers will actually accept manuscripts via e-mail, or at writers' conferences—face to face!
- b. **Query letter basics:** Some publishers want advance queries about YA novels or non-fiction, but rarely about picture books. Other publishers are not interested in advance queries at all. They want you to send the novel or non-fiction book (or proposal), period. In a query letter, again, be succinct. Include the title and type of manuscript, the number of pages and a short description ("Are you interested in reading my 120-page, middle-grade novel, *Behind the Scenes*, about a girl who gets a crush on her drama teacher while acting in the 7th grade annual play?"). You should also include your credentials. Many publishers request that you send some chapters with a query letter as well. The publishers will then decide if they want to read the rest of your book. (The writers' market guides will let you know whether a publisher wants to see a cover letter and full manuscript or a simple query letter.)

Quick Tip: Make your query letter sing. It has to grab the editor’s attention because editors are busy people. Really work on crafting a quality query letter. Sometimes, it’s good to find a really “juicy” paragraph from your book and copy it and paste that passage into the first paragraph of your query letter. Then, drop down in the second paragraph and say, “This is an excerpt from my non-fiction book, “Real Kids, Real Heroes.”

- c. **Children’s book proposal basics (for tween and teen novels or YA series):** A proposal is a good way to acquire a contract without writing the whole book. It consists of a few chapters or spreads and an outline of the rest of the book. Also, you list competitive works and how your book is better or different or both than the books currently in the marketplace (you can get this info by going online at Amazon.com or by visiting your local bookstore.) You tell how your book has a marketing edge and tell who the audience is for your book. Also, tell if this book you’re proposing is the first in a series or a stand alone. List any marketing ideas you have concerning formatting or sales. Make sure you list your credentials and expertise for writing the book. (Get Christopher P.N. Maselli’s “Proposals With Pizzazz” booklet for more information about book proposals! I use his format and sell lots and lots of books because of my power-packed proposals.)

4. Nail it and mail it! Then, start again...

Once you’re completely satisfied with your story and cover letter or query letter or book proposal (depending on what the publisher requires that you send), pray over it, and put that anointed piece of writing into the mail.

- a. **Keep good records:** Using either a 3-by-5 card file or a computer program, chart your submissions and keep good records. Always include pertinent information such as: Who you sent your submission to; where you sent it; when you sent it, and what you actually sent (a proposal or simply a query letter). When one of your books gets accepted, go back and put a big old smiley face ☺ next to that entry and write SOLD on top of it so you’ll know you can’t sell that story to another publisher.

QUICK TIP: Don’t use a hokey mailing envelope or send cookies along with your story. Just be professional. Oh, and make sure you follow the guidelines when sending in your manuscript. If the publisher clearly states “We don’t accept email submissions,” then don’t send your story electronically. You don’t want to irk the editors. ☺

5. Be Aggressive! Go to writers’ groups. Join writing/publishing societies. And, attend conferences to learn, learn, learn and sell, sell, sell.

Don’t try to go it alone—networking, learning and getting published go hand in hand.

- a. **Critique Groups:** Join a local critique group, because it’s always good to have another set of eyes or two to read over “your stuff”

before you present it to agents and/or publishing houses. Try to find a critique group just for children’s writers, and don’t be afraid to share your stories with others.

- b. **Join writing/publishing societies:** The Society of Children's Books Writers and Illustrators is a national organization for writers and artists. Anyone can join. The society publishes a newsletter and various reports, including a list of legitimate agents and several market surveys, which members may obtain for the cost of postage. It is especially well known for hosting conferences all around the country. These are open to members and non-members alike. In addition, the SCBWI has a web site where you can download a useful pamphlet on submission basics entitled "From Typewriter to Printed Page." Membership is approximately \$50 per year. Find SCBWI online at www.scbwi.org

Quick Tip: Join the local chapter of SCBWI, too!

c. **Attend writers’ conferences** (especially ones that offer children’s writing classes). OK, so you’re already at this conference, but this information will help you prepare for future conferences. First off, find out which publishers/magazines are sending editors to the conference you’re attending. Next, find out which of those publications/book publishers publish children’s articles and books. Now, research each of those companies individually, and see what they’ve been publishing; what they’ve had success with; how your writing would fit into their publishing programs; etc. Once you have all of this information, you can make informed decisions about which ones you’ll want to “meet with” at the conference. (Most conferences allow two or three scheduled 15-minute appointments with acquiring editors.)

Quick Tip: Put together proposals and “Synopses” lists for each house/magazine. Using bullet-points, name the manuscripts you have available and offer a descriptive paragraph for each—length, age group, plot, title, stand alone or part of a series, etc. (Ask, can I send you any of these? Most won’t want to take them from you at the conference because of travel—only allow so many manuscripts in suitcases, you know?)

Quick Tip #2: Practice your “pitch.” Be able to describe your book idea in a couple of sentences—dynamic, thought-provoking sentences. So, when you see that editor at lunch, you can “wow” him/her with a brief summary of your book. Like the Bible says, “Be ready at all times.” ☺

6. Lastly, get a plan—a writing plan.

Have a plan for implementing writing/marketing into your already busy work schedule: Because it’s difficult to make a living writing children’s books, most

children’s writers have “a day job” of some sort. If you fall into that category, you’re going to have to commit to your writing. If you don’t, your great stories will never make it into print.

a. Tips for finding time for your children’s writing.

***Bright and Early:**

*If you’re a morning person, get up an hour earlier and spend 45 minutes putting together query letters and finding places to send those letters. (Keep track of where you send each query letter so you don’t duplicate. I use a 3-by-5 card filing system, but you could do it on your computer.)

***Letters while Lunching:**

*Eat a protein bar instead of going out for lunch, and use that time to create query letters and write your children’s books.

***Write at Night:**

*Once the house is quiet (when most everyone else is in bed) spend some time writing. This is my best time, as I’m not a morning person. So, if you’re a night owl, write at night.

***Super Saturdays:**

*Take one or two Saturdays a month and find a quiet place to develop query letters and write articles. Pencil in these Saturdays in your daytimer—just like you would any other appointment—that way you’ll stick to it.