

A GUIDE FOR WRITERS OF BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

WRITING CHILDREN'S BOOKS

A Complete Guide to the Craft, the Industry, and the Path to Publication



The Children's Room, Early Morning · *after Edward Hopper*



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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Almost everyone who loves children has, at some point, imagined writing a book for them. The impulse is a good one. A children's book is often the first literature a person ever meets, and the books we heard at bedtime or found on a classroom shelf can stay with us longer than nearly anything we read afterward.

This guide gathers in one place what a beginning writer needs to know before writing, revising, and sending out a book for young readers: the age categories and how the books change as readers grow, the conventions of the picture book, what writers should and should not do about illustration, how the industry is organized, which markets exist, what editors and agents are hoping to see and what they are tired of seeing, how to find an

agent, where and how to submit, and how to self-publish responsibly if that is the path you choose. It closes with a shelf of model books to study, a set of templates, a list of the best books on the craft, and a final checklist.

Read it straight through once. Then keep it beside you and return to the section you need. Submission policies change often, sometimes month to month, so treat every market listing here as a starting point and confirm the current guidelines on the publisher's own website before you send anything.

IS WRITING A CHILDREN'S BOOK HARD?

Yes. It is one of the most common misunderstandings in all of writing that a short book for a young reader must be an easy book to write. The shortness is precisely what makes it hard. A picture book of four hundred words has no room for a wasted sentence, a vague image, or a scene that does not move. A novel can recover from a slow chapter; a picture book cannot recover from a slow page.

The difficulty comes from several directions at once:

- **Compression.** Most picture books published today run well under a thousand words, and many editors prefer far fewer. Every word must carry weight, and much of the story must be left for the pictures to tell.
- **Two audiences.** A picture book is bought, and usually read aloud, by an adult, but it must belong to the child. It has to delight the listener on the first reading and survive the fiftieth reading by a tired parent.
- **The child's point of view.** Adults tend to write about children; good children's writers write from inside childhood. The concerns of a five-year-old (a lost toy, a new sibling, a fear of the dark) are not small to the five-year-old, and a book that treats them as small will fail.
- **Competition.** The market is crowded with gifted writers, many of whom are also illustrators, and the major houses accept work only through agents. Picture-book texts in particular face long odds.
- **Patience.** Even after a contract, a picture book commonly takes two years or more to reach the shelf, because the illustrator's schedule shapes the calendar.

None of this is a reason not to try. It is a reason to approach the work with the same seriousness one brings to a poem, which is what the best picture books most resemble. Writers who succeed tend to share a few habits: they read hundreds of recent books in their category, they write many manuscripts rather than polishing one forever, they join a critique group, and they revise until every page turn earns its place.

THE CATEGORIES BY AGE

Children's publishing is organized by the age of the reader, and the category you choose determines nearly everything else: length, vocabulary, the age of your main character, the role of illustration, and the agents and editors who will want to see it. The ranges below reflect the figures most often cited by agents, editors, and children's publishing guides in 2026. They are norms, not laws, and individual publishers set their own limits.

CATEGORY	READER AGE	TYPICAL LENGTH	PRINTED PAGES	DEFINING FEATURES
Board book	0–3	Up to about 100 words	12–24 sturdy pages	Concepts (colors, counting, animals, routines); strong rhythm; often a single word or line per page
Picture book	3–8 (most often 4–7)	Fiction usually under 500–600 words; rarely over 1,000	32 (sometimes 40 or 48)	Read aloud by an adult; text and art tell the story together; built around page turns
Nonfiction picture book	4–10	Often 500–1,500 words, sometimes up to 2,000	32–48	Biographies, science, history; may include back matter such as a timeline, glossary, or author's note
Early reader	5–8	About 200–2,500 words, depending on level	32–64	For children reading on their own for the first time; controlled vocabulary, short sentences, illustrations on most pages
Chapter book	6–10	About 4,000–15,000 words	48–120	Short chapters; one main plot; frequent black-and-white illustrations; often a series
Middle grade	8–12	About 20,000–55,000 words (fantasy can run longer)	100–250	Protagonist usually 10–13; friendship, family, school, adventure; the child's place in their world
Upper middle grade	10–14	About 40,000–65,000 words	200–300	A bridge to young adult; more complex themes, still without the romantic and sexual content of YA
Young adult	12–18	About 50,000–90,000 words	250–400	Protagonist usually 15–18; identity, independence, first love, the self against the world
Graphic novel	All ages, especially 8–14	Measured in pages and panels rather than words	Often 160–250	Story told in sequential art; written as a script with panel descriptions

Word-count ranges are drawn from The Manuscript Academy's 2026 guide to word counts, Mary Kole Editorial, and Writer's Digest.

Two rules govern almost every category. First, **children read up**: they like to read about characters a year or two older than themselves, so a book for seven-year-olds usually stars an eight- or nine-year-old. Second, **be specific about your age range**. An agent who sees “ages 1–10” in a query concludes that the writer does not yet know the market. Name a narrow band, such as “ages 4–7,” and make sure the manuscript fits it.

HOW THE BOOKS CHANGE AS READERS GROW

The categories are not simply longer or shorter versions of one another. Each one answers to a different stage of a child's life as a reader and a person.

Who Holds the Book

Board books and picture books are read *to* a child. The adult's voice is part of the performance, which is why rhythm, repetition, and the sound of the words matter so much, and why the vocabulary of a picture book can be richer than the child's own: a listener can enjoy a word like *enormous* or *rumpus* long before she can read it. Early readers and chapter books are read *by* the child, which changes everything. Now the sentence must be decodable, the paragraph short, and the page uncrowded.

Sentences and Vocabulary

Early readers are often written to a level system set by the publisher, with limits on sentence length, the number of words per page, and the vocabulary used. Chapter books relax those limits but still favor short paragraphs and plenty of dialogue. By middle grade the prose can be as supple as any adult novel's, so long as it stays clear and never talks down.

Point of View and Inner Life

Picture books are usually told in close third person or in a lively first person, and the inner life is shown through action and image more than thought. Middle-grade fiction opens the child's mind: the reader learns what the hero fears, wishes, and misunderstands. Young adult fiction goes further still into interiority, self-scrutiny, and the felt intensity of adolescence, and first-person narration is common.

Theme and Subject

Each stage has its characteristic concerns. The very young care about routines, bodies, animals, and the people who love them. Picture-book readers care about friendship, fairness, fear, siblings, and the first experiences of school. Chapter-book readers want humor, mystery, and independence. Middle-grade readers live in the world of family, friends, and belonging, and they can face loss and injustice when it is handled with hope. Young adult readers want to be taken seriously as people deciding who they will become; the subjects can be as difficult as any in adult fiction.

Illustration

Illustration shrinks as the reader grows. In a board book or picture book the art is half the story or more. Early readers keep pictures on nearly every page to support decoding. Chapter books use black-and-white spot illustrations every few pages. Most middle-grade and young adult novels have no interior art beyond a cover, with the notable exception of the graphic novel, where art carries the whole narrative.

The Ending

Picture books and chapter books almost always end in safety and resolution. Middle grade may end in loss, but it ends with the possibility of hope. Young adult fiction can end in ambiguity, as adult fiction does. One rule holds at every age: **the child solves the problem**. A story in which a wise adult arrives to fix things robs the young reader of the satisfaction the book exists to give.

THE PICTURE BOOK UP CLOSE

Because most first-time children's writers begin with a picture book, it deserves a closer look. The form is governed by the physical book, and a writer who understands the object will write better text for it.

Why Thirty-Two Pages

Books are printed on large sheets that are folded and trimmed into groups of pages called signatures, usually in multiples of eight or sixteen. For a full-color picture book, thirty-two pages is the most economical length, and it has become the standard. Some books run to forty or forty-eight pages, especially nonfiction, but every extra signature raises the cost, and a debut picture book should be imagined at thirty-two. After the title page, copyright page, and dedication, roughly twenty-four to twenty-eight pages remain for the story itself, usually arranged as twelve to fourteen two-page spreads.

Self-Ended and Separate Endpapers

In a hardcover with *separate endpapers*, the endpapers are glued to the boards and do not count among the thirty-two pages, so the interior is entirely available for front matter and story. In a *self-ended* book, the first and last pages of the thirty-two are themselves pasted down to the covers, leaving fewer pages for the text. You do not need to choose; the publisher decides. But it is useful to know that the space is finite and already spoken for.

The Page Turn

The page turn is the picture book's most important dramatic device. It is the moment of suspense between one spread and the next: *And behind the door was . . .* A good picture-book writer plans where each turn will fall, so that a question raised on the right-hand page is answered when the page is turned. This is one reason to make a rough dummy of your own (see the templates later in this guide) even if you will never draw a line of the finished art.

Structures That Recur

Picture books draw on a handful of shapes that have served storytellers for centuries:

- **The rule of three.** The character tries three times, failing twice before succeeding, or meets three visitors, or makes three wishes.
- **The circular story.** The book ends where it began, but the character, or the reader, has changed.
- **The cumulative story.** Each page adds an element to a growing list, in the manner of “The House That Jack Built.”
- **The journey and return.** The child leaves home, has an adventure, and comes back to safety, a pattern as old as Max’s sail to where the wild things are.
- **The problem and solution.** A clear want, an obstacle, rising attempts, a dark moment, and a resolution the child brings about.
- **The concept or mood piece.** A lyrical book organized by an idea, a season, or a feeling rather than a plot, harder to sell than a story but beloved when it works.

Leave Room for the Pictures

The single greatest skill in picture-book writing is knowing what *not* to say. If the art will show that the dog is red and the kitchen is a mess, the text should not say so. The words should do what pictures cannot: give voice, rhythm, sound, inner feeling, and humor that arises from the gap between what is said and what is shown. When the text says “Everything was perfectly calm” and the picture shows chaos, the book has come alive.

The Read-Aloud Test

Read every draft aloud, then ask someone else to read it aloud to you. Listen for tongue-twisting clusters, sentences that run out of breath, and places where a listener’s attention drifts. Repetition, refrains, onomatopoeia, and strong verbs are the friends of the read-aloud book.

About Rhyme

Editors do publish rhyming picture books, and some of the most loved books in the language rhyme. What editors dislike is *bad* rhyme: forced inversions, near-misses, uneven meter, and stories bent out of shape to reach a rhyming word. As a Writer’s Digest editor put it, the trouble is not rhyme itself but rhyme done poorly (*Writer’s Digest*). Rhyme also cannot be translated, which limits foreign sales. If you write in rhyme, your meter must be flawless when read aloud by a stranger. If you are uncertain, write in rhythmic prose instead.

HOW FORMULAIC ARE CHILDREN’S BOOKS?

Children’s books are conventional, but the best of them are not formulaic. It helps to separate what is fixed from what is free.

What Is Largely Fixed

- **Length and format.** The thirty-two-page picture book, the word-count ranges, and the age bands are industry standards because they are tied to printing costs, shelving, and the way teachers, librarians, and booksellers buy.
- **The child at the center.** The protagonist is a child (or a childlike animal or creature) who acts, decides, and solves the problem.
- **Age-appropriate content.** Each category has an understood boundary of language and subject. Young adult fiction can approach almost anything; a picture book cannot.
- **A satisfying shape.** Young readers expect a beginning, a middle with rising trouble, and an ending that resolves. Picture books in particular reward clear structure.
- **Series conventions.** Early readers and chapter books are often published in series with recurring characters, consistent length, and a predictable chapter rhythm, because children who love one book want the next.

What Is Free

Voice, humor, the angle of vision, the surprise of the premise, the beauty of the language, and the emotional truth are entirely the writer's own. Editors say again and again that what they look for is not a new formula but a distinct voice and a fresh way into a familiar feeling. The conventions are the sonnet's fourteen lines: a frame inside which originality becomes visible.

Where Formula Shows Through

Mass-market and licensed books (stories built around a television character, a toy, or a brand) are written to tighter templates, often as work for hire. Leveled early readers produced for schools follow strict vocabulary lists. These are honorable kinds of work, and some writers make a living at them, but they are a different job from writing an original trade picture book.

ILLUSTRATION: WHAT EVERY WRITER SHOULD KNOW

If You Are Pursuing Traditional Publication, Do Not Hire an Illustrator

This is the most expensive mistake beginning picture-book writers make. A traditional publisher chooses and pays the illustrator, and editors take great care in pairing a text with the right artist. A manuscript that arrives with commissioned art forces the editor to accept or reject the art along with the words, and it often leads to rejection of both. Children's publishing guides and agents are nearly unanimous on this point ([Mary Kole Editorial](#); [Novlr](#)). Tilbury House states it plainly in its own guidelines: "It is NOT necessary to provide illustrations with a picture book story" ([Tilbury House](#)).

You Will Probably Not Choose or Even Meet the Illustrator

In most houses the author and illustrator work separately, each through the editor and art director. Many authors see sketches and are invited to comment on matters of accuracy, but the visual interpretation belongs to the illustrator. This is part of the collaboration, and often the source of a book's magic: the artist sees what the writer did not.

Art Notes, Sparingly

Include an illustration note only when the text cannot be understood without it, for example when the words say one thing and the picture must show another, or when a key fact (the narrator is a dog) is not in the text. Put such notes in brackets, keep them short, and use as few as possible. A manuscript full of instructions to the illustrator reads as a writer who does not trust the form.

Author-Illustrators

If you are a trained artist, you may submit as an author-illustrator. In that case you send a *dummy*: a mock-up of the whole book with rough sketches on every spread and two or three finished pieces of art to show your style. Author-illustrators have an advantage in the picture-book market, but only if the art is professional in quality. Publishers will consider text and art separately; one may be accepted without the other.

If You Are Self-Publishing

Here you must hire and pay an illustrator yourself, and the quality of the art will largely determine the quality of the book. Look for an artist who has illustrated children's books before, study complete portfolios rather than single images, and sign a written contract that states the fee, the schedule, the number of revisions, the exact rights you are buying (print, ebook, audio, merchandise, and territory), credit, and who owns the original art. Expect professional illustration of a full picture book to be a significant expense.

Artificial Intelligence

Many children's publishers now refuse manuscripts or art made with generative AI. Flashlight Press, for example, states that it does not accept "manuscripts written using AI" and asks writers not to send AI-generated art ([Flashlight Press](#)). Read each publisher's policy, and send only work that is entirely your own.

A Few Terms

- **Spread:** two facing pages designed as a single image.
- **Spot illustration:** a small image set within the text, without a full background.
- **Vignette:** an image whose edges fade or float rather than filling the page.
- **Gutter:** the fold at the center of a spread, where no important detail should fall.
- **Bleed:** art that runs past the trimmed edge of the page.
- **Dummy:** a mock-up of the book showing text placement and sketches page by page.

THE INDUSTRY: HOW CHILDREN'S PUBLISHING WORKS

The Large Houses

Each of the major publishing groups has a children's division with many imprints: Penguin Random House (including Random House Children's Books, Knopf, Viking, Penguin Young Readers, Dial, and Putnam), HarperCollins Children's Books (including Balzer + Bray, Greenwillow, and Katherine Tegen), Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing (including Atheneum, Beach Lane, and Margaret K. McElderry), Macmillan Children's Publishing Group (including Farrar, Straus and Giroux Books for Young Readers, Feiwel and Friends, and Roaring Brook), and Hachette's Little, Brown Books for Young Readers. Scholastic is a major children's publisher in its own right and also runs the book fairs and book clubs found in many American schools. Other important houses include Candlewick, Abrams, Bloomsbury, Chronicle, Holiday House, Charlesbridge, Peachtree, Sourcebooks, and Lerner.

The large houses accept manuscripts almost exclusively through literary agents. The Children's Book Council's member directory lists Random House Children's Books, HarperCollins Children's Books, Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, and Abrams as accepting manuscripts only from agents and/or published authors, and Bloomsbury Children's Books as agented only ([Children's Book Council](#)).

How a Book Is Acquired

An editor who loves a manuscript must usually persuade colleagues at an acquisitions meeting, where sales, marketing, and publishing staff weigh whether the book will find its readers. If the house makes an offer, the agent negotiates the contract. For a picture book, the editor and art director then select an illustrator, whose schedule may be booked a year or more in advance. Two to three years from contract to publication is common for picture books; novels usually move somewhat faster.

How Writers Are Paid

Traditional publishers pay an *advance* against future *royalties*, usually in installments tied to signing, delivery, and publication. The writer earns no further royalties until the book's earnings have repaid the advance. For a picture book, the advance and royalties are generally divided between author and illustrator, often equally, although the illustrator, who does the larger share of the labor, sometimes receives more ([Mary Kole Editorial](#); [DIY MFA](#)). A traditional publisher never asks the author to pay for editing, illustration, printing, or distribution. Money flows toward the writer.

Who Buys Children's Books

The buyers are adults: parents and grandparents, teachers, school and public librarians, and booksellers. This matters for the writer, because a book must appeal both to the child and to the gatekeepers who choose it. Reviews in *School Library Journal*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Booklist*, and *The Horn Book* carry great weight with librarians, and awards such as the Caldecott, Newbery, Coretta Scott King, Pura Belpré, and Printz Awards can keep a book in print for decades.

The Market Today

Children's books remain a large and steady part of the trade. Circana BookScan reported overall children's print growth of 3 percent in 2025, with activity books one of the fastest-growing segments (*Publishers Weekly*). Graphic novels for young readers have become one of the most vigorous categories of the past decade. At the same time, the business is not without strain: Albert Whitman & Company, publisher of the Boxcar Children for more than a century, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in April 2025 (*Publishers Weekly*). Houses come and go, merge, close, and reopen to submissions, so a writer must keep current.

THE DIFFERENT MARKETS

"Children's publishing" is really several markets, each with its own buyers, expectations, and ways of working with writers.

TRADE

Books sold through bookstores, online retailers, and to libraries. This is the market of the original picture book and novel, the reviews and awards, and the agented submission. It is the most prestigious and the most competitive.

SCHOOL AND LIBRARY (INSTITUTIONAL)

Publishers such as Lerner, Capstone, ABDO, Rourke, and Cherry Lake produce nonfiction series and leveled fiction for schools and libraries, often in reinforced library bindings. Much of this work is assigned to writers on a work-for-hire basis, with a flat fee rather than royalties. It is an excellent market for writers with subject knowledge and a reliable work ethic.

EDUCATIONAL AND LEVELED READERS

Textbook and reading-program publishers commission short, leveled texts to exact specifications. The writing is constrained, the pay is a flat fee, and the work can be steady.

MASS MARKET AND LICENSED

Inexpensive formats sold in supermarkets, big-box stores, and book fairs, including books based on films, television, games, and toys. Most licensed books are written for hire by writers the publisher already knows.

FAITH-BASED AND VALUES MARKETS

Religious publishers and their children's imprints (Beaming Books and Eerdmans Books for Young Readers among them) publish books for families and congregations. Some accept unsolicited manuscripts.

GIFT, NOVELTY, AND BOARD BOOKS

Interactive books, lift-the-flap and pop-up formats, and gift books are usually developed in house, with text commissioned to fit a format. Publishers such as Chronicle, Quarto, and Phaidon are active here.

REGIONAL AND SPECIALTY PRESSES

Smaller houses that focus on a place, a subject such as nature or science, or a mission. These are often the most open to unagented writers and can give a first book careful attention.

MAGAZINES

Children's magazines have long been a place for new writers to publish short fiction, poetry, and articles. Their windows open and close: as of October 2026, *Highlights* magazine states that it is closed to submissions, and Cricket Media states that it has no open calls ([Highlights](#); [Cricket Media](#)). Check back, since both have reopened in the past.

SELF-PUBLISHING

Print-on-demand and ebook platforms allow any writer to publish, and some self-published children's books find real readers, especially through local sales, school visits, and community events. The self-published author pays for illustration and design and does all of the marketing. Bookstores, schools, and libraries are harder to reach without a trade distributor and trade reviews.

INTERNATIONAL AND TRANSLATION

Children's books travel well across languages when the story does not depend on rhyme or wordplay. Foreign rights are usually sold by the publisher or the agent.

WHAT PUBLISHERS WANT AND WHAT THEY DON'T

Tastes vary from editor to editor and shift from year to year, but certain preferences are consistent across agents' wish lists, editors' interviews, and publishers' guidelines.

Most Wanted

- **Humor.** Genuinely funny books, for every age, are always in demand and always scarce.
- **A strong hook.** A premise that can be stated in one sentence and makes an adult smile or lean forward.
- **Child-centered emotional truth.** Feelings children actually have, seen from the child's height.
- **Read-aloud language.** Rhythm, refrain, and sound that make the book a pleasure to perform.
- **Distinctive voice.** A narrator or tone that could belong to no other book.
- **Diverse and authentic stories.** Books that reflect the range of children's lives, especially when told from firsthand experience. Kane Miller, for instance, notes its preference for community stories "written from a firsthand experience" (Kane Miller).
- **Nonfiction with a fresh angle.** Picture-book biographies of lesser-known people, and science, nature, and history told through a surprising lens.
- **Graphic novels and hybrid formats** for middle-grade readers.
- **Series potential** in early readers and chapter books.
- **Books that serve classrooms** without feeling like lessons.

Least Wanted

- **Moral lessons.** Didactic stories in which a character learns to share, be kind, or eat vegetables because the author says so.
- **Poor rhyme.** Forced, uneven, or story-bending verse.
- **Manuscripts that are too long.** A fiction picture book of 1,500 words signals a writer who has not studied the current market.
- **Adult nostalgia.** Books about what childhood used to be like, written for grown-ups rather than children.
- **Adult problem-solvers.** Parents, teachers, or grandparents who resolve the child's problem.
- **Holiday stories.** A crowded field; Kane Miller states that it is not considering them in any age range (Kane Miller).
- **Well-trodden concepts** such as alphabet books and bedtime stories without a new twist.
- **Talking objects without a reason,** and animals that could just as well be children.
- **"Written for my grandchild"** stories that mean everything to one family but lack a universal appeal.
- **Previously self-published books,** which many houses decline.

The surest way to learn current taste is to read the books published in the last three years by the houses you hope to join, and to study agents' posted wish lists on [Manuscript Wish List](#).

LITERARY AGENTS

Do You Need One?

To reach the large houses, yes. An agent knows which editors are acquiring what, submits to many of them at once, negotiates the contract, protects subsidiary rights, and guides a career over many books. Agents are paid a commission (in the United States, typically 15 percent of domestic earnings) only when the writer is paid. A legitimate agent never charges a reading fee, an editing fee, or any other upfront fee. Members of the Association of American Literary Agents agree to a code of ethics that forbids such charges.

You can publish without an agent through the many smaller and independent houses that accept unagented submissions (see the next section), through contests, and through the school-and-library and magazine markets.

What Children's Agents Look For

- A manuscript that is complete and thoroughly revised. Agents do not take on unfinished children's books.
- For picture-book writers, more than one strong manuscript. Agents represent careers, and a single picture book rarely sustains one. Have three to five polished texts ready when you query.
- Knowledge of the category: correct length, clear age range, and two or three comparable recent titles.
- Professional behavior: following each agent's guidelines exactly, and patience.

How to Find Agents

1. **Study the acknowledgments** of recent books you admire; authors often thank their agents.
2. **Search agent databases.** [QueryTracker](#) lists agents by category and lets you record your queries. [Manuscript Wish List](#) lets you search by genre for what agents say they hope to receive. Publishers Marketplace (a paid service) reports agents' recent sales.
3. **Attend conferences.** SCBWI regional and international conferences offer manuscript critiques by agents and editors, and some houses closed to unsolicited work will read submissions from attendees.
4. **Check each agent's current status.** Many children's agents open to picture books only during set windows or only by referral. One agent's posted wish list, for example, says she accepts picture-book submissions only "by request from events" ([Manuscript Wish List](#)).

How to Query

Most agents now accept queries by email or through an online form such as [QueryManager](#). A query letter has four parts: a personal line explaining why you chose this agent, a short pitch of the book in the style of jacket copy, the book's essential facts (title, category, age range, word count, and comparable titles), and a brief biography. For a picture book, agents usually ask for the full text pasted below the letter; for a novel, the first pages or chapters. A template appears later in this guide. Query in small batches of eight to twelve agents, learn from the responses, and revise before the next round.

Red Flags

- Any request for money before a sale: reading fees, critique fees, "marketing packages."
- An agent who has no verifiable sales to recognized publishers.
- Pressure to sign quickly, or a contract that binds you for an unusually long period with no clear way out.
- Unsolicited offers to represent you that arrive after you have published something yourself.

[Writer Beware](#), maintained by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association, documents scams and questionable practices across all of publishing and is worth consulting before you sign anything.

WHERE TO SUBMIT AND HOW

Publishers That Have Accepted Unagented Work

The Children's Book Council's member directory, which records each member's submission policy, lists the following among those accepting unsolicited or unagented manuscripts as of October 2026 ([Children's Book Council](#)). Confirm each one on its own website before sending anything; policies change without notice.

- Andrews McMeel Publishing
- Greystone Kids
- Annick Press
- Holiday House
- Arbordale Publishing (picture books)
- Levine Querido
- Beaming Books
- Nobrow / Flying Eye Books
- Blue Dot Kids Press
- Platypus Media
- Chronicle Books (by email)
- Quarto Children's Group USA
- Creston Books
- Quirk Books
- Eerdmans Books for Young Readers
- Readers to Eaters

Three houses whose own guidelines we checked directly:

- **Sleeping Bear Press** publishes board books, beginning readers, picture books, and select middle grade. It accepts manuscripts by email, with the email serving as the cover letter, and responds within six months only if interested ([Sleeping Bear Press](#)).
- **Tilbury House** publishes board books, beginning readers, picture books, and middle grade, fiction and nonfiction, and considers electronic submissions only ([Tilbury House](#)).
- **Flashlight Press** publishes fiction picture books for ages four to eight, under 1,000 words, with universal themes about family or social situations. Unagented authors may email a text-only manuscript with a structured query ([Flashlight Press](#)).

Houses Currently Closed or Restricted

- **Charlesbridge**, whose program had read unsolicited manuscripts from January to June each year, states that it is "pausing operations on our open children's submissions program" ([Charlesbridge](#)).
- **Peachtree** is "not accepting unsolicited manuscripts or dummies" and reviews agented or requested work ([Peachtree](#)).
- **Kane Miller** states that submissions are closed ([Kane Miller](#)).
- **Lee & Low Books** is closed to unsolicited manuscripts but accepts agented submissions and projects from conferences its editors attend; its New Voices Award for unpublished writers of color and Native or Indigenous writers will next open in 2027 ([Lee & Low Books](#)).
- **Page Street Publishing** currently invites young adult fiction and states that it does not publish board books, early readers, chapter books, or middle grade ([Page Street](#)).

How to Prepare a Submission

1. **Read the guidelines twice.** Some houses want the manuscript attached as a Word file; others want it pasted into the email and will delete attachments unread. Some want a query first. Follow the instructions exactly.
2. **Format the manuscript cleanly.** A standard serif font at 12 points, one-inch margins, your contact information and word count at the top of the first page, and page numbers. Picture-book texts are usually double-spaced; novels always are.
3. **Write a short cover letter or query.** Title, category, age range, word count, a two- or three-sentence summary, why this publisher, and a brief biography.
4. **Send one manuscript at a time** to each house unless the guidelines say otherwise.
5. **Keep records.** Note where and when you sent each manuscript, the stated response time, and the result. A tracker appears among the templates.
6. **Simultaneous submissions** are widely accepted in children's publishing, but tell the editor if another house makes an offer.
7. **Wait.** Many houses respond only if interested, often within three to six months. If the time has passed, assume a pass and move on.

Other Doors

- **SCBWI** (the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators) is the essential professional organization for children's writers. Membership brings conferences, critiques, grants and awards, regional critique groups, and its member publication *The Essential Guide to Publishing for Children*, which includes market surveys (SCBWI).
- **Contests and awards for unpublished writers**, such as Lee & Low's New Voices Award and Sleeping Bear Press's award for new authors who identify as BIPOC or LGBTQ+, can lead directly to publication.
- **Magazines**, when open, offer publication credits and editorial experience.
- **Work for hire** in the school-and-library market, which usually begins with a writing sample and a résumé sent to the publisher's editorial department.

SELF-PUBLISHING A CHILDREN'S BOOK

Self-publishing can be the right choice for a book with a clear local or community audience, for a writer who already speaks in schools or works with families, or for a project the trade will not take on. It is a different undertaking from submission, and it should be entered with open eyes.

- **Edit before you illustrate.** Hire an editor experienced in children's books, or work with a strong critique group, before spending anything on art. Changing a finished spread costs far more than changing a sentence.

- **Hire a professional illustrator and designer.** See the illustration section above for what the contract should cover. A designer who knows children's books will handle trim size, typography, and the cover.
- **Choose a format.** Common picture-book trim sizes include 8.5 by 8.5 inches, 8 by 10 inches, and 10 by 8 inches (landscape). Full-color printing on print-on-demand platforms such as Amazon KDP and IngramSpark is more costly per copy than black-and-white printing, which affects the list price you can set.
- **Own your ISBNs.** In the United States, ISBNs are sold by Bowker. Buying your own makes you the publisher of record.
- **Plan the marketing.** Self-published children's books sell mostly through the author's own efforts: readings at libraries and schools, local bookstores that take books on consignment, community events, and a website.
- **Beware of vanity presses.** Companies that charge large fees to "publish" children's books, often while presenting themselves as traditional or hybrid publishers, are a persistent hazard. If a publisher requires you to pay or to buy copies as a condition of publication, it is a vanity publisher, whatever it calls itself (**Writer Beware**).
- **Know the trade-off.** Most traditional houses will not consider a book that has already been self-published unless it has sold in remarkable numbers. If you hope for a trade career, think carefully before self-publishing your strongest manuscript.

MODEL CHILDREN'S BOOKS TO STUDY

There is no substitute for reading. Before writing in any category, read at least a hundred recent books in it, and then reread the masterpieces slowly, as a writer. Type out the text of a picture book you admire and you will see at once how few words it uses and how much it leaves to the art. The list below pairs enduring classics with more recent books that show the form as it is practiced now.

Board Books and Concept Books

- Margaret Wise Brown, illustrated by Clement Hurd, *Goodnight Moon* (1947): the bedtime book that every other bedtime book answers.
- Bill Martin Jr., illustrated by Eric Carle, *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (1967): pattern, repetition, and the page turn in their purest form.
- Eric Carle, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969): counting, days of the week, and transformation in one shapely story.
- Sandra Boynton, *Moo, Baa, La La La!* (1982): humor for the very youngest listener.

Picture Books

- Ezra Jack Keats, *The Snowy Day* (1962): a small, perfect story of a child alone in the world for a day.
- Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963): fewer than four hundred words, a journey and return, and the most famous wordless spreads in children's literature.
- Jane Yolen, illustrated by John Schoenherr, *Owl Moon* (1987): the quiet, lyrical picture book done supremely well.
- Kevin Henkes, *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* (1996): a child's strong feelings, taken seriously and with humor.
- Julia Donaldson, illustrated by Axel Scheffler, *The Gruffalo* (1999): proof that rhyme, when flawless, is irresistible.
- Mo Willems, *Knuffle Bunny* (2004): comic timing and the gap between what the words say and the pictures show.
- Jon Klassen, *I Want My Hat Back* (2011): spare text, deadpan humor, and an ending the reader completes.
- Drew Daywalt, illustrated by Oliver Jeffers, *The Day the Crayons Quit* (2013): a high-concept premise in an epistolary structure.
- Matt de la Peña, illustrated by Christian Robinson, *Last Stop on Market Street* (2015): the Newbery Medal winner that shows how much a picture book can hold.

Nonfiction Picture Books

- Brian Floca, *Locomotive* (2013): history told through sound, motion, and close detail.

- Jen Bryant, illustrated by Melissa Sweet, *The Right Word: Roget and His Thesaurus* (2014): the picture-book biography of a lesser-known life.

Early Readers

- Else Holmelund Minarik, illustrated by Maurice Sendak, *Little Bear* (1957): the founding text of the modern “I Can Read” book.
- Dr. Seuss, *Green Eggs and Ham* (1960): written with only fifty different words.
- Arnold Lobel, *Frog and Toad Are Friends* (1970): simple sentences, deep friendship, and real wit.
- Mo Willems, the Elephant & Piggie series (begun 2007): dialogue-driven early readers that children read aloud to adults.

Chapter Books

- Mary Pope Osborne, the Magic Tree House series (begun 1992): the model of the long-running adventure series.
- Kate DiCamillo, illustrated by Chris Van Dusen, *Mercy Watson to the Rescue* (2005): a bridge from picture book to chapter book.
- Annie Barrows, illustrated by Sophie Blackall, *Ivy + Bean* (2006): friendship, mischief, and an independent reader’s sense of humor.
- Abby Hanlon, *Dory Fantasmagory* (2014): a vivid voice and an inventive mix of text and drawings.

Middle Grade

- E. B. White, *Charlotte’s Web* (1952): friendship and mortality for young readers, written in some of the clearest prose in the language.
- Louis Sachar, *Holes* (1998): intricate plotting that never loses its humor.
- Kate DiCamillo, *Because of Winn-Dixie* (2000): loss and belonging in a warm first-person voice.
- Rebecca Stead, *When You Reach Me* (2009): a puzzle novel with a beating heart.
- R. J. Palacio, *Wonder* (2012): multiple points of view around one child’s first year at school.
- Kwame Alexander, *The Crossover* (2014): the novel in verse for middle-grade readers.
- Jerry Craft, *New Kid* (2019): the first graphic novel to win the Newbery Medal.

Young Adult

- S. E. Hinton, *The Outsiders* (1967): often called the first modern young adult novel, written when its author was a teenager.
- Laurie Halse Anderson, *Speak* (1999): a difficult subject handled with honesty and restraint.
- Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give* (2017): a contemporary voice that speaks to its moment.
- Jason Reynolds, *Long Way Down* (2017): a verse novel told in the length of an elevator ride.
- Elizabeth Acevedo, *The Poet X* (2018): identity and faith in a young poet’s voice.

Graphic Novels

- Raina Telgemeier, *Smile* (2010): the graphic memoir that changed what middle-grade readers expected from a book.
- Dav Pilkey, the Dog Man series (begun 2016): proof that comedy and comics bring reluctant readers to books.

TEMPLATES

These templates show standard professional formats. Replace each bracketed placeholder with your own information. A Word version of the picture-book manuscript template is available as a separate download.

Template 1. Picture-Book Manuscript Format

[Your Name]
[Street Address]
[City, State ZIP]
[Email] · [Phone]

Picture Book, Ages [4–7]
[412] words

[TITLE IN CAPITAL LETTERS]
by [Your Name]

[The first lines of your story begin here, double-spaced, in a 12-point serif font such as Times New Roman, with one-inch margins.]

[Begin a new paragraph, or leave a blank line, wherever you imagine a new page or a page turn. Some writers mark each page with a bracketed number, such as [p. 5], but many agents prefer clean text.]

[Art note: Use a bracketed note only when the reader cannot understand the story without it, for example, “The narrator is the family dog.”]

[END]

Number each page in the top right corner with your last name and a short title: *[Lastname] / [SHORT TITLE] / 2*. Do not include illustrations unless you are a professional illustrator submitting a dummy.

Template 2. The Thirty-Two-Page Layout Map

Use this map to divide your text into spreads before you submit. It shows one common arrangement for a self-ended book; publishers vary the front matter.

PAGES	CONTENTS	YOUR TEXT
1	Half title or title page	—
2–3	Copyright, dedication, and title spread	—
4–5	Spread 1: the opening; introduce the character and the want	
6–7	Spread 2: the problem appears	
8–9	Spread 3: first attempt	
10–11	Spread 4	
12–13	Spread 5: second attempt	
14–15	Spread 6	
16–17	Spread 7: the midpoint, often a surprise	
18–19	Spread 8: third attempt	
20–21	Spread 9	
22–23	Spread 10: things are at their worst	
24–25	Spread 11: the turning point; the child finds a way	
26–27	Spread 12: the climax	
28–29	Spread 13: resolution	
30–31	Spread 14: the final image or twist	
32	A last page: a coda, a final joke, or back matter	

To make a rough dummy, fold eight sheets of paper in half, nest them, and staple at the fold. Number the pages, cut your text into pieces, and tape each piece where it falls. Read it aloud, turning the pages. You will discover at once where the story drags and where a page turn needs a stronger question.

Template 3. Query Letter

Dear [Agent's or Editor's Name],

[One sentence on why you are writing to this person: a book they represent or edited, a wish-list item, a conference where you heard them speak.]

[Two to four sentences that pitch the story as jacket copy would. Name the main character, what she wants, what stands in her way, and what is at stake, in the voice of the book.]

[TITLE] is a [fiction picture book / chapter book / middle-grade novel] for ages [4–7], complete at [450] words. It will appeal to readers of [Comparable Title, Author, Year] and [Comparable Title, Author, Year].

[Two or three sentences about you: relevant experience, publications, SCBWI membership, and any personal connection to the subject. Keep it brief and factual.]

Following your guidelines, I have pasted the full text [or the first ten pages] below. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

[Email] · [Phone] · [Website, if any]

Choose comparable titles published within the last three to five years. Avoid comparing your book to universally famous classics; the agent wants to know that you know the current market.

Template 4. Novel Manuscript Format (Chapter Book, Middle Grade, Young Adult)

[Your Name]

[Email] · [Phone]

[Middle-Grade Contemporary]

[42,000] words

[TITLE]

by [Your Name]

Chapter One

[Chapter Title, if any]

[Begin each chapter on a new page, about a third of the way down. Double-space throughout, indent paragraphs one-half inch, and use a 12-point serif font with one-inch margins. Do not add extra space between paragraphs.]

Template 5. Submission Tracker

MANUSCRIPT	AGENT OR PUBLISHER	DATE SENT	METHOD	STATED RESPONSE TIME	RESULT	NOTES
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BOOKS ON WRITING FOR CHILDREN

These are the guides I would put in a writer's hands, organized by the kind of book you want to write.

For Every Children's Writer

- Cheryl B. Klein, *The Magic Words: Writing Great Books for Children and Young Adults* (W. W. Norton, 2016). A longtime children's editor on character, plot, voice, and revision, across every category.
- Harold D. Underdown, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Publishing Children's Books*, 3rd ed. (Alpha, 2008). Despite the title and the date, still the clearest map of how children's publishing works. Underdown keeps current articles at his site, [The Purple Crayon](#).
- SCBWI, *The Essential Guide to Publishing for Children* (available to members). Market surveys and practical career advice, updated regularly ([SCBWI](#)).
- Nancy Lamb, *The Writer's Guide to Crafting Stories for Children* (Writer's Digest Books, 2001). A sound introduction to story structure for young readers.
- Jane Yolen, *Take Joy: A Writer's Guide to Loving the Craft* (Writer's Digest Books, 2006). Encouragement and wisdom from the author of more than four hundred books.

For Picture Books

- Ann Whitford Paul, *Writing Picture Books: A Hands-On Guide from Story Creation to Publication*, revised and expanded ed. (Writer's Digest Books, 2018). The standard workbook on the form.
- Uri Shulevitz, *Writing with Pictures: How to Write and Illustrate Children's Books* (Watson-Guptill, 1985). A Caldecott medalist on how pictures and words share the work.

- Molly Bang, *Picture This: How Pictures Work* (Chronicle Books, revised ed. 2016). A short, brilliant book on visual composition that will change how you imagine your spreads.
- Leonard S. Marcus, ed., *Show Me a Story! Why Picture Books Matter* (Candlewick, 2012). Conversations with leading picture-book artists.

For Nonfiction

- Melissa Stewart, ed., *Nonfiction Writers Dig Deep: 50 Award-Winning Children's Book Authors Share the Secret of Engaging Writing* (National Council of Teachers of English, 2020).

For Middle Grade and Young Adult

- Mary Kole, *Writing Irresistible Kidlit: The Ultimate Guide to Crafting Fiction for Young Adult and Middle Grade Readers* (Writer's Digest Books, 2012). A former agent on voice, character, and the differences between the two categories.
- Regina Brooks, *Writing Great Books for Young Adults* (Sourcebooks, revised ed. 2014). Practical guidance from a literary agent.

For Graphic Novels

- Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993) and *Making Comics* (2006). The classic explanations of how sequential art tells a story.

For Markets

- *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market* (Writer's Digest Books). Use the most recent edition, and verify every listing online, since printed directories date quickly.

ORGANIZATIONS AND RESOURCES

- **SCBWI**: the professional society for children's writers and illustrators, with regional chapters, critique groups, and conferences.
- **The Children's Book Council**: the trade association of children's publishers; its member directory records submission policies.
- **Manuscript Wish List**: agents' and editors' posted wishes, searchable by category.
- **QueryTracker**: an agent database and query log.
- **Writer Beware**: warnings about scams, vanity presses, and predatory practices.
- **The Purple Crayon**: Harold Underdown's long-running site of articles on children's publishing.
- *Publishers Weekly* Children's Bookshelf, *School Library Journal*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and *The Horn Book*: read them to learn what is being published and praised.
- Your public library's children's room and its librarians: the best market research there is, and free.

A FINAL CHECKLIST

- ☐ I have read at least a hundred books in my category published in the last five years.
- ☐ I can name my category and a narrow age range, and my manuscript fits both in length and content.
- ☐ My main character is a child, a little older than my reader, who solves the problem.
- ☐ For a picture book: the text is lean, leaves room for the art, and works across fourteen spreads with strong page turns. I have made a rough dummy.
- ☐ I have read the manuscript aloud and had someone else read it aloud to me.
- ☐ If it rhymes, the meter is flawless when read cold by a stranger.
- ☐ The book does not preach. Any lesson arises from the story, not from the narrator.
- ☐ I have not hired an illustrator (unless I am self-publishing), and I have included only essential art notes.
- ☐ A critique group or experienced reader has seen it, and I have revised in response.
- ☐ I have two or three recent comparable titles.
- ☐ I have a query letter or cover letter written to each recipient's guidelines.
- ☐ I have confirmed each agent's or publisher's current submission status on their own website.
- ☐ No one I am submitting to has asked me for money.
- ☐ I have a tracker, and I have started the next manuscript.

A PERSONAL NOTE

I have spent most of my working life in classrooms, and I have watched what a single book can do for a young reader: the child who will not read until he meets the right story, the girl who copies out a sentence she loves and keeps it in her pocket. Those moments are the reason to write for children, and they are worth every revision it takes to earn them.

If you are beginning, begin by reading, and then write many short drafts rather than guarding one. Find a few honest readers. Be patient with the industry and generous with yourself. A children's book asks for the discipline of a poem and the heart of a good teacher, and most of us have more of both than we think.

—James Mulhern

SOURCES

Submission policies and market details were checked against these pages in October 2026. Policies change often; confirm every listing on the publisher's or agent's own site before submitting.

1. The Manuscript Academy, "Word Count by Genre: What Literary Agents Want (2026 Guide)." <https://manuscriptacademy.com/word-count-by-genre-literary-agents-2026>
2. Mary Kole Editorial, "Explaining Chapter Book Age Range." <https://www.marykole.com/chapter-book-age-range>
3. Writer's Digest, "The Most Common Mistakes Children's Books Authors Make." <https://www.writersdigest.com/the-most-common-mistakes-childrens-books-authors-make>
4. Mary Kole Editorial, "How to Hire an Illustrator." <https://www.marykole.com/hire-an-illustrator>
5. Novlr, "So You've Written a Picture Book. What Next?" <https://www.novlr.org/the-reading-room/so-youve-written-a-picture-book-what-next>
6. Tilbury House Publishers, "Submissions." <https://www.tilburyhouse.com/submissions>
7. Flashlight Press, "Submission Guidelines." <https://www.flashlightpress.com/submission-guidelines/>
8. Children's Book Council, "Our Members" (member submission policies). <https://cbcbooks.org/publishers/our-members/>
9. DIY MFA, "Picture Books: Not So Easy." <https://diymfa.com/writing/picture-books-not-so-easy/>
10. Publishers Weekly, "Hot Activity Book Sector Offers Screen-Free Fun." <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/101056-hot-activity-book-sector-offers-screen-free-fun.html>
11. Publishers Weekly, "Children's Institute 2026: Chicago's Publishers Produce Books for World's Young Readers." <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/100664-children-s-institute-2026-chicago-s-publishers-produce-books-for-world-s-young-readers.html>
12. Highlights for Children, Submission Manager (status notice of August 20, 2026). <https://highlights.submittable.com/submit>
13. Cricket Media, "Submission Guidelines." <https://cricketmedia.com/submission-guidelines/>
14. Kane Miller, "Submissions." <https://www.kanemiller.com/submissions>
15. Manuscript Wish List. <https://manuscriptwishlist.com/>
16. QueryTracker. <https://querytracker.net/>
17. Manuscript Wish List, "MSWL Search." <https://manuscriptwishlist.com/find-agentseditors/search/>
18. Manuscript Wish List, agent profile: Renee Runge, Spencerhill Associates. <https://manuscriptwishlist.com/mswl-post/renee-runge/>
19. Writer Beware (SFWA), "Vanity, Subsidy, and Hybrid Publishers." <https://sfwa.org/other-resources/writer-beware/vanity/>
20. Sleeping Bear Press, "Submissions." <https://www.sleepingbearpress.com/submissions>
21. Charlesbridge, "Children's Book Submissions." <https://www.charlesbridge.com/pages/submissions>
22. Peachtree Publishing, "Submissions." <https://www.peachtree-online.com/submissions/>
23. Lee & Low Books, "New Voices Award." <https://www.leeandlow.com/writers-illustrators/new-voices-award>
24. Page Street Publishing, "Submissions." <https://www.pagestreetpublishing.com/submissions>
25. SCBWI, "Print and Online Resources." <https://www.scbwi.org/scbwi-membership-print-and-online-resources>
26. Harold Underdown, The Purple Crayon. <https://www.underdown.org/>
27. SCBWI, "SCBWI Membership." <https://www.scbwi.org/membership>