



**How to Write a Children's Book
&
Get It Published**

Getting Started

January 2019

Dear Reader,

I'm glad you found this e-book. That means you have a dream of writing for children. Maybe you've already written your story, or maybe you're just thinking about it. Either way, you're in the right place.

The Highlights Foundation teaches the art and craft of writing and illustrating for children. For 35 years, we've been teaching individuals like you how to form your ideas into the stories you've always dreamed of writing.

We are pleased to offer this collection of articles to help you get started. Often, the hardest part of getting started is knowing where to turn. I hope this e-book will help. If you want to learn more, please join us at our retreat center for our "getting started" workshop: Everything You Need to Know About Writing a Children's Book. Instructor Harold Underdown literally wrote the book: *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Publishing a Children's Book*.

Our retreat center is located near Honesdale, Pennsylvania, at the home of my great-grandparents, who started Highlights magazine. Located amongst the rolling hills of the northern Pocono mountains, you'll find the quiet, relaxed atmosphere an ideal setting to work with others like you in getting their ideas on paper.

You'll be well cared for with your own private lodging, home-cooked meals, and natural surroundings. Visit our website to see a video of our campus.
www.HighlightsFoundation.org/facility

Your teachers will be professionals in the children's publishing world: authors, editors, librarians, and other experts in crafting great stories. You'll learn what you need to know about writing your story, refining it, and finding the right publisher.

We offer more than 40 workshops each year on a wide range of topics, offering encouragement for both beginning and published authors and illustrators. I hope this collection of articles is a helpful step along your journey of telling the story that only you can tell.

Sincerely,

George Brown
Executive Director



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How to Write a Children's Book: Get Started With These 5 Steps

Step #1: Find out HOW to get started

We have several workshops aimed especially at giving you an overview of the children's book industry:

[Everything You Need To Know About Children's Book Publishing: A Crash Course](#)

This intensive weekend is designed to give you a comprehensive look at how the children's book publishing industry works. You will gain understanding of all processes associated with submitting, selling, developing, and marketing a trade book or magazine article. March 21 - 24, 2019

[Writing for All Young Readers: Board Books through MG Series](#)

Taught by four authors with over 30 books published for readers of all ages, this workshop is for anyone looking for ways to break in or expand upon a career in writing for children, from board books to middle grade series. October 10 - 13, 2019

Step #2: Explore the world of children's books

The kidlit community is large, warm and welcoming. If you're going to write for children, you should get involved:

- Join the Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI).
- Befriend a children's librarian, or haunt a children's bookstore, and read, read, read. Find the books that you love, the stories that call to you.
- Attend an SCBWI conference.
- Follow your favorite authors, illustrators and publishers on social media. Follow us, too! @HighlightsFound on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Step #3: Work on the CRAFT of writing for children

- Sign up for our signature workshop, [Summer Camp at the Barn: A Week of Creative Mentorship](#).
- You'll find keynotes, breakout sessions, camaraderie and a creative mentor to provide one-on-one support.
- Read some of the wonderful books about writing for children.
- Join a critique group.
- Learn how to revise! We offer several revision workshops each year.
- Bring your manuscript to one of our workshops and get a hands-on session with one of our mentors. We offer workshops for all levels on many subjects.

Step #4: Study the BUSINESS of getting published

- Follow some kidlit editors and agents on social media, to understand what they are looking for.
- Learn how to write an impressive query letter.
- Find out what the best submission practices are.
- Study the publishers who publish books for children.

Step #5: Send your stories out into the world

- Don't send your work to a publisher before it's ready-but don't wait forever, either.
- Brace yourself for rejection-but keep writing, revising and submitting.
- Don't forget to stay inspired and to keep the faith.
- Ready? Go back to Step #1: Find out how to get started!

Getting Out of the Slush Pile

So how can you get out of the “slush pile,” the publishing term for the hundreds of manuscripts received by publishers each day?

There is no 100% guaranteed sure-fire way, and even if you do get out of the slush pile you may not get published. But here are some things you can do that can help your manuscript get read:

- It may help to address your submission to a particular editor, if you have made a real contact with someone, either through an encouraging letter or through meeting him/her at a conference, so that they are likely to remember your name.
- Get their attention with your cover letter, which should be no longer than half a page, or it won't be read to the end. Give them a reason to read on by making it clear that you have something unique for them.
- Do your market research. Try submitting your manuscript to lesser-known publishers and other forms of publishing, like regional, niche, magazine, and specialty publishers.
- Work on the manuscript. Then, work on the manuscript some more. When you think you are finished, go back and work on the manuscript. Be tough on yourself. Many manuscripts that publishers get seem not to have been revised, critiqued, or rethought in any way-taking part in writer's workshops or local writing classes is thus a very good idea.
- The best way to get out of the slush pile is to write what you are passionate about, and then try to find an editor who shares your passion. Strive to get beyond competence to something only you can write about in a particular way. After all, if you aren't passionate about your writing, there's simply no reason to be in this field.

In the end, the manuscript has to speak for itself. There is no magic formula beyond that.

7 Quick Tips for Beginning Writers

- 1) Work on your manuscript: writing the perfect query letter and targeting just the right publisher or agent is useless if the story isn't ready.
- 2) Follow the rules and don't be "clever"—and that means read submission guidelines and standard practices.
- 3) Do your research: look beyond the names you already know.
- 4) Ignore the odds: persistence is no guarantee of success, but giving up too soon IS a guarantee that you won't get published.
- 5) There is no one sure-fire path to publication. Find your own. Everyone's path is different.
- 6) You don't need an agent, except in particular circumstances.
- 7) Think outside of the /your box: what about magazines, nonfiction, and other paths?



Investing In Your Writing

Life has taught me that in order for my dreams to take root and flourish, I must invest in them. I must make them a priority. This might be obvious to some, but for many writers, we seem to forget this. We think we need to sell a book or have a completed manuscript before we're willing to consider investing in our dream.

Why is this?

If we want to become a dancer, we take dance classes. If we want to strengthen our singing, we take voice lessons—not waiting for the record deal to be signed. Instead, we do it in pursuit of that dream. But for many writers, especially when we're just starting out, we believe the only thing we need to do is sit in solitude and write. Yes, this is vital. However, for most, investing in our writing takes more than just carving out time and tapping a string of words into a keyboard. It's about finding ways to help put our best manuscript forward. As writers, we need to understand that it is okay (and necessary) to invest in ourselves and our writing.

Still not sure? Here are a few simply reasons why:

- As we learn, we grow. Take time not only to write, but to read widely and continuously. Whether craft books or others as mentor text, take the time to study the market and writing styles, not only to learn from the best, but to gain valuable understanding from weak writing as well.
- Writing is solitary. By attending classes, workshops or conferences (whether in person or online) we find community. We find people of like minds who help motivate and encourage, and more importantly, people who can experience this journey with us.
- Building connections. Events are a wonderful way to hear editors, agents, and authors talk about the business of writing. It is also an opportunity to meet with professionals to discuss our work and how it compares.
- Add to your toolbox. With every class, workshop, or conference I've ever attended, I've come away a little richer in knowledge. There is always at least one takeaway to add to my ever-expanding writer's toolbox.
- We don't know what we don't know. Through attending these events we not only learn craft-based lessons, we also gain a better understanding of the publishing business, elements to consider, and just exactly what we still need to learn.
- Telling ourselves (and the world) this matters. By investing in our dreams, we are acknowledging their importance. We are saying that we are taking this pursuit seriously and are ready to try.
- If money is a concern, start with books from the library, free webinars, and online videos. Join meetup groups to find critique buddies. Seek out scholarships, and local author talks or community writing events.

It is only fair that we give ourselves all that we need to succeed in our dreams. So why not start investing in you now?

Find Your Writing Voice

Much of what passes across an editor's desk has a dull sameness. There may be nothing really "wrong" with the writing. It's competent, but it falls under the category of NNUTS (Nothing New Under the Sun). Nothing new in the ideas, nothing new in the characters or plot, and nothing new in the writing. Beginning—and sometimes experienced—writers often submit manuscripts that do not have unique voices.

Our greatest writers write from their guts, from their truths. They dig deep until they reach a vein within themselves that is pure gold. They tell stories that only they can tell, as only they can tell them. That, in a nutshell, is voice.

It often takes years for a writer to find his or her authentic voice. Voice is not simply the way a writer says things; voice reflects a writer's unique way of viewing the world. Every editor is hoping to pick up a manuscript and find an original voice. That's why finding your voice should be on the top of your writer's to-do list.

Here are six ways to begin to understand voice and find your own:

- 1) Get a journal with a key—one of those kid ones. Write things in there that are so honest you have to keep them under lock and key for fear anyone will read them.
- 2) Write a page a day. Come on—you can do it! If you can't stop yourself after one page, keep writing.
- 3) Read, and learn to write, poetry. Even if you don't consider yourself a poet or have any desire to write poetry, you will develop your voice. (I'm not talking rhyming doggerel here. I'm talking Billy Collins, Rita Dove, and Langston Hughes; Eileen Spinelli, Karla Kushin, and Myra Cohn Livingston.)
- 4) Use photos from your childhood as writing prompts. Write from the voice of who you were in (or at the time of) the photos.
- 5) Blog. Much like a vocalist's morning scales, this kind of "conversational" writing will help to loosen your writing voice.
- 6) Read the first pages of these books: *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* by Kate DiCamillo, *Love That Dog* by Sharon Creech, *The Highest Tide* by Jim Lynch, every Newbery winner you can get your hands on. (I dare you to stop reading after page 1.)

Finding your voice will help your work rise to the top of the same-old-same-old manuscripts piled on editors' desks. And that's a goal worth pursuing!

Questions to Ponder

If you've thought about writing or illustrating for children but don't know where to start, here are some questions to ponder:

How do I turn my idea into a good, solid story?

Should I send my story to a magazine or to a book publisher?

To which publisher should I submit my story?

Do I send my entire story or just a synopsis? Is there a "right way" or a "wrong way" to submit a story?

What does a book contract look like? How much money will I make?

Do I need to find an agent before I've actually sold a story?

I'm an artist. Do I need to send an illustrated story to a publisher, or can I just send some sample art?

Should I self-publish my book?

How do publishers place books with bookstores, libraries and online retailers?

Writing Books for Kids is Hard, but You Can Totally Do It

These are just some of the questions you'll have as you begin your journey to become a published children's book author or illustrator. We hope you'll consider finding answers at one of our workshops! On the next page you'll find the workshops we think are especially good for beginners.

Upcoming Workshops

[Everything You Need To Know About Children's Book Publishing: A Crash Course](#)

March 21 - 24, 2019

[Crafting a Picture Book Dummy with Heart and Soul: A Creative Breakthrough](#)

May 30 - June 2, 2019

[PB&J: Picture Books and All That Jazz](#)

June 20 - 23, 2019

[Summer Camp at the Barn: A Week of Creative Mentorship](#)

July 7 - 12, 2019

[Master Class in Writing Nonfiction for Children & Young Adults](#)

July 13 - 17, 2019

[The Ins and Outs of a Picture Book and Its Many Forms](#)

August 4 - 7, 2019

[Novel Beginnings: Building Strong Foundations for Your Novel and Your Career](#)

August 8 - 11, 2019

[Writing for All Young Readers: Board Books through MG Series](#)

October 10 - 13

[The Craft and Heart of Writing Poetry for Children](#)

October 13 - 16, 2019

We hope to see you soon!

