

Getting Started in Writing

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Like any other art, business or profession, writing is a skill that requires study and practice before you are likely to succeed. Luckily, there are many excellent resources for writers, many of them online. Many of these resources pertain to writing for children and teens, but much is applicable to writing for all audiences.

As a first step into understanding the building blocks of writing for children, you might want to check out <http://www.scbwi.org/Pages.aspx/Just-Getting-Started>, which answers some basic questions. As you begin your writing journey, here are a few things to keep in mind:

1. Learn the vernacular and conventions. Learn how to format your manuscript, understand the differences between a query letter and a cover letter, learn the shorthand such as SASE (self-addressed stamped envelope) and CWIM (Children’s Writers and Illustrator’s Market guide).
2. Study the basics of your genre. If you’re writing/illustrating picture books, know how many words are typical and what constitutes a good “illustration possibility.” Read not only the books you and your children like, but also the books recently published in the genre.
3. Study and practice the craft. You wouldn’t expect to go to Carnegie Hall without practice-practice-practice, right? Writing is like any other skill—the more you write, the better you will be. Practice some of the basic technical elements such as point-of-view and show-don’t-tell until you’ve mastered them in your own work.
4. Seek out fellow writers/illustrators and actively seek comment on your work. There’s nothing like talking writing, whether you’re a beginner or have four books published! It’s also invaluable to seek out fellow writers/illustrators to offer comments on your work. You’ll discover your strengths as well as areas to improve (and it’s always best to improve your work *before* it lands on an agent’s or editor’s desk!)
5. Study the market. Know what publishers are publishing in your genre. Study those titles. What makes them special? Why do you think the editor bought that particular manuscript? What literary conventions or technical craft does the author use successfully? What *doesn’t* work for you in the book?
6. Cultivate patience. Becoming a good writer or illustrator – and producing saleable work – takes time. Months and years. One author likened it to making a piece of fine furniture: you shape the pieces; assemble them; sand; varnish; then repeat until it’s polished and perfect. It takes an average of 10 years (yes, ten years) to be published – less if you already are well-tutored on writing techniques and are talented, more if you haven’t studied at all about writing for children and are talented.

Like any job or profession, you need to know, understand and practice the basics of your craft. Reading writing textbooks is a good start. There are many books on craft. Begin with the general, and then move on to the specific. At the end of this guide, I have included some books to get you started; most are available at your favorite bookstore or local library.

There are also excellent online resources, such as Arthur Levine editor Cheryl Klein’s amazing blog with FAQs at <http://chavelaque.blogspot.com/search/label/FAQ>

Newsletters and Professional Journals

An excellent, reasonably priced newsletter that touches on everything from poetry to historical fiction to edgy teen books is The Children’s Writer, at www.childrenswriter.com.

Children’s Book Insider (CBI) at www.write4kids.com has a monthly e-mail newsletter (subscription)

Professional journals often have some of their articles available to view for free online. Some of those publications include The Horn Book (www.hbook.com), School Library Journal (www.schoollibraryjournal.com), VOYA (reviews of YA/teen books) at www.voya.com, and the American Library Association (www.ala.org).

There are two well-known writer's magazines, although neither is specifically for children. One is *Writer's Digest* at www.writersdigest.com, and the other is *The Writer*, at www.writermag.com/wrt/. I especially like *The Writer Magazine* for craft-oriented stories.

The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators has a monthly bulletin for members with how-to articles, legal information, and listings of conferences and workshops on children's writing/illustrating. You can find information on how to join SCBWI at www.scbwi.org. Members can also join an active online community called the Discussion Boards on the SCBWI website. A great place to get your questions answered.

Conferences

Conferences are one of the best ways to network with fellow writers and hear editors and publishers speak about their take on the children's book business.

To find conferences related to writing for children and teens, including the two national SCBWI conferences, check the events calendar at www.scbwi.org. Conference listings are also often found in writing magazines and on related Websites.

Free Stuff

Free online newsletters from Publishers Weekly offer great tips and articles:

<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/email-subscriptions/index.html>

Click on the Newsletter tab and choose Children's Bookshelf and Publisher's Daily to subscribe.

Publisher's Lunch is a free daily online newsletter on what's what in the publishing world. The subscription includes a weekly Publisher's Marketplace edition where recent sales of books to publishers are posted. NOTE: there is a free version and a pay version. Make sure you sign up for the free one.

<http://www.publishersmarketplace.com/lunch/subscribe.html>

Many publishers, editors and agents have an email newsletter. Sign up for them all!

Blogs

Many writers, editors and agents have blogs. Some of them are jam-packed with great information. Always check out links and resources, which will lead you to lots more!

<http://cindachima.blogspot.com/> I often post answers to writer's questions on my blogs. Search under the tag, Young Writer.

<http://nathanbransford.blogspot.com/> Great info on writing, agents, process, craft and publishing buzz.

<http://editorialanonymous.blogspot.com/> This blog minces no words; only fools.

<http://queryshark.blogspot.com/> Analyzes and critiques query letters

<http://internspills.blogspot.com/> The straight dope on publishing from the industry's most feared staffer—the intern.

Also hilarious

<http://editorialass.blogspot.com/> The inside info from a recovering editorial assistant

<http://institutechildrenslit.net/Writers-First-Aid-blog/> Because sometimes you need some first aid.

<http://wordswimmer.blogspot.com/> Excellent craft site

<http://www.teachingauthors.com/> Lots of links.

There are lots ... hundreds ... of good blogs. You'll find that the blogs here will lead you to more blogs, and soon you'll be inundated. Try Google Reader to manage all your blogs. <http://www.google.com/reader/view/#overview-page>

Book Review Sites

<http://www.cbcbooks.org/> Lots of writing information as well as book blurbs

<http://www.teenreads.com/> Reviews for ... teens!

<http://richiespicks.com/> reviews of books for older readers

Some Online Writing Groups

Most of these groups are private and require that you submit a request to become a member. Some are more active than others. The fact that a list is mentioned here is not an endorsement of its membership or content; please check out the list for yourself and see if it meets your needs.

For non-fiction writers:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NFforKids/> An excellent group, loaded with info on research, sources, definitions

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/historical-fiction-writers/> Historical fiction resources and discussion

For fiction writers:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ChildrensPublishers/> Detailed info on publishers

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Childrens-FandSF-Writers/> For those writing SciFi or Fantasy for reader's ages 8-teen

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/picture-books/> Discussion of creation and publication of picture books

<http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~mjoseph/childlit/about.html> An academic discussion of children's literature. Scroll down to the commands, follow info for subscribing

For illustrators:

<http://www.yellapalooza.com>

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/picture-books/> Discussion of creation and publication of picture books

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Illustrators-4Kids-Markets/> For those who want to illustrate all aspects of children's markets – magazines, books, greeting cards, etc.

Some Web Resources

Author websites often contain good tips on writing, and great links to articles or websites about writing. Visit my website at www.cindachima.com and click the tab, Tips for Writers. There you will find information about agents, writing technique, and other issues.

A few others to start you off: www.janeyolen.com, and www.cynthialeitichsmith.com, a repository for all things writing. Anastasia Suen has an excellent blog at <http://picturebookday.wordpress.com/> dedicated to studying the craft and technique of writing picture books.

There are lots of how-to-write websites. One that focuses exclusively on children's writing is www.verlakay.com (Verla Kay's site is called the Blue Board and has a message board and chat room). Smartwriters is a comprehensive site at www.smartwriters.com for both adult and youth writers.

A must for writers: Harold Underdown's The Purple Crayon website at www.underdown.org. Click on the Articles Index – the category under Basic Information has lots of practical information.

The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) is the professional organization for those in children's publishing. Some of the SCBWI website at www.scbwi.org is open to non-members; the Discussion Boards and Publications Guides are not. Look under Regions, and you may find regional meetings and critique groups happening near you!

Don't miss checking out the Ohio SCBWI website, too, at www.nohscbwi.org. You'll find some great articles, info on area critique groups (and tips on starting your own critique group) and interviews with Ohio SCBWI authors and illustrators. The OH SCBWI discussion group listserve is open to members only.

The Institute of Children's Literature (ICL) is a terrific resource at <http://www.institutechildrenslit.com/rx/>. The ICL's monthly newsletter, The Children's Writer, is excellent and very reasonably priced. www.childrenswriter.com. Occasional online chats with editors, authors and publishers are open to the public.

For magazine writers, a great place to start is www.janfields.com. While there, check out the link to her Kid Magazine Writers site (www.kidmagwriters.com) which has interviews with magazine editors, submission information ... it's a wow website!

Two comprehensive sites about children's publishers, which include submissions guidelines: <http://www.childrenspublishers.com/> and www.jacketflap.com.

Children's Book Council has reviews of new books and submissions info for publishers; <http://cbcbooks.org/>

Whether you write sci fi and fantasy or not, check out www.sfwaweb.org/; the website has been recently totally revamped. Under the For Authors tab check out the Information Center for manuscript guidelines, information about contracts, etc. Also visit the famous Writer Beware page that will help direct you away from scams directed at writers.

This site from a Rutgers professor is a resource for YA writers: <http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/>

A place to check if agents, publishers or contests are legitimate: <http://www.anotherealm.com/prededitors/>

For a thorough discussion of agents, go to the message board at www.verlakay.com and type "Agents" into the search bar. You'll find a listing of agents who represent children's books at the scbwi website. www.scbwi.org. Search for an agent on the Agent Query website here <http://agentquery.com/>. Wondering how long it might take for an agent to get back to you? Join the querytracker database here. <http://querytracker.net/> Or go to the Association of Authors' Representatives website. <http://aaronline.org/> Not all legitimate agents are members of AAR, but all members must meet specific standards.

Books on Writing for Children and Teens

YOU CAN WRITE A CHILDREN'S BOOK by Tracey E. Dils

PICTURE WRITING by Anastasia Suen

IT'S A BUNNY EAT BUNNY WORLD by Olga Litowinsky

WRITING FOR YOUNG ADULTS by Sherry Garland

THE COMPLETE IDIOT'S GUIDE TO PUBLISHING CHILDREN'S BOOKS, 3rd edition, by Harold Underdown

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Writing for Young Adults

TAKE JOY by Jane Yolen

ALSO: Invest in a good dictionary, thesaurus, and punctuation/grammar handbook

Writers' Reading List

Assorted books ranging from motivational books to serious texts.

Most are technical craft books but not specifically oriented for children's writers.

Beginnings, Middles and Endings by Nancy Kress

Bird by Bird by Anne Lamott

Characters and Viewpoint by Orson Scott Card
Dear Genius by Leonard Marcus
Eats, Shoots & Leaves by Lynne Truss
How to Write a Book Proposal by Michel Larsen
On Writing – Stephen King
On Writing Well (Non-Fiction) by William Zinsser
Self-Editing for Fiction Writers by Renni Browne and Dave King
Spunk & Bite by Arthur Plotnik
Steering the Craft by Ursula LeGuin
Story by Robert McKee
Take Joy by Jane Yolen
The Art of Fiction by John Gardner
The Artist’s Way by Julia Cameron
The Courage to Write by Ralph Keyes
The Elements of Style by Strunk and White
The First Five Pages by Noah Lukeman
Writing Down the Bones by Natalie Goldberg
Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft by Janet Burroway
Writing the Breakout Novel – Donald Maass