

The Little Big Book of Children's Book Writing Techniques & Terminology



by Dr. Mira Reisberg
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Hullo, I'm Dr. Mira Reisberg, passionate creative, former kid lit professor, award-winning and best-selling children's book creator with over 600,000 books sold, former children's literary agent, mentor to many now very successful authors and illustrators, independent editor and art director, and the Director of the Children's Book Academy. As you can see, over the past 28 years, I've worn just about every hat in the industry and now I'm excited to be combining a lot of that hard-earned knowledge into this little big book of children's book writing techniques and terminology.

I've created it as an A-Z alphabetarian book, and like the word alphabetarian, there will be other fun words and terms here that may or may not exist in the dictionary but that definitely do exist in the world of children's book writing. All the images in this book are either my own, my former assistant Leda Chung's, or are from public domain sources.

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If interested, you can find out more about me at www.mirareisberg.com or find me online at Twtr: @ChildrensBookAc like us at <https://www.facebook.com/childrensbookacademy> or join our tribe here <http://bit.ly/CBAtribe> Happy reading!! 😊



Active **Versus** Passive Language

Active language is when the subject does something rather than something is done to the subject. In our example below, Mary is the subject.



Watch out for using words like “was” or “has been” or “is being” just after the subject. These are often signs of passive language.

See Miranda Paul’s great grammar course to really write and format like a pro!

<http://www.childrensbookacademy.com/get-your-grammar-groove.html>



Alliteration

This is when the first letter of two or more words match.

The **w**ind **w**as howling
so loudly that Jason didn't hear his
sister **s**peak.



Analogy

This is the comparison of two unlike things, which are used to explain a concept or mood. Analogy comes in two different forms. Simile is when the two very different things are compared using the words “like” or “as”. Metaphor can include similes but is broader as in our example. Similes and metaphors will help your writing sing as they add color and beauty to your language.

Simile



Metaphor



Antagonist

The antagonist is the opposite of your protagonist/main character. It can be the bully, the snarky sister or brother, or any number of characters who antagonize the hero throughout their journey during the story.



Antihero

The antihero is either the unlikely hero or the morally ambiguous hero. In the TV series *Monk*, Monk is a real antihero. In *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, A. Wolf is a true antihero who does not possess heroic qualities but charms us nonetheless.

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphic characters are race neutral and often gender neutral as well. They can do things that would be dangerous for a child to do, don't have to have parents, and tend to be adorable. Think *Clark the Shark* or *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*.



Antonym

This is a word that means the opposite of another word. You could do a fun story about a confused kid who mostly uses antonym words.



Archaic Language

Unless you are writing an historical story...
...avoid archaic language like thus, or upon, or yonder that kids wouldn't use today.



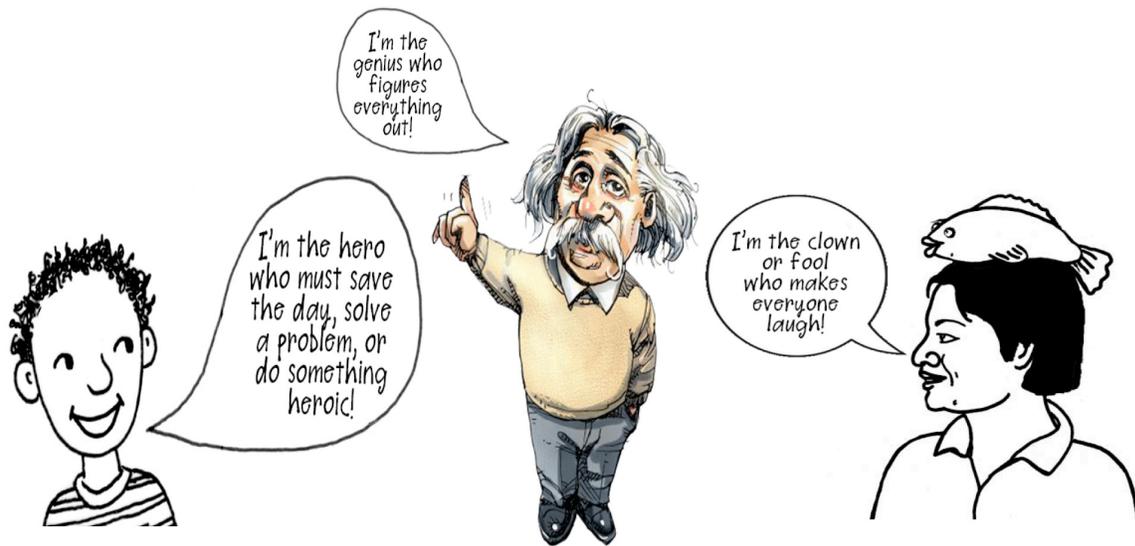
Archetypes

It's great to think of your characters in terms of cultural archetypes. Most plot-driven stories use archetypes whether consciously or not. Joseph Campbell did extensive research into folk tales and fairy tales to come up with his concept of the hero's journey. Valerie Estelle Frankel did her own research into similar sources but from a feminine perspective to create *From Girl to Goddess: The Heroine's Journey*. We were inspired by both of these to create *The Hero's Art Journey* that teaches folks art and illustration techniques while exploring the archetypes in our own lives here

<http://www.childrensbookacademy.com/the-heros-art-journey.html>

I'm going to present a bunch of archetypes here but see if you can come up with a bunch of your own as models to populate your own stories. From now on pay attention when you watch TV or movies to see which ones you can identify. One of my favorites is the Detective La Rue series that play with the "Truth Seeker or Detective" archetypes who have to figure everything out.



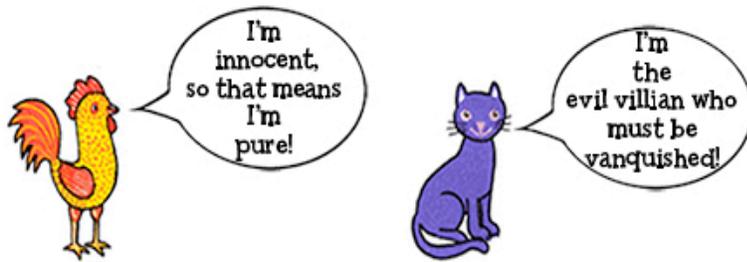


The hero is usually the main character in the story who may have any of these archetypal traits. The clown or fool is often the sidekick or annoying friend although sometimes it can also be the main character, especially if there's an innocence to its ignorance.



...the outlaw, the pirate, the scofflaw who breaks all the rules and is always in trouble, or the outcast who stands up for their beliefs against all odds. And not to forget...

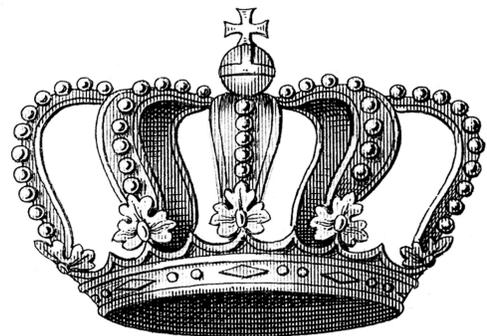




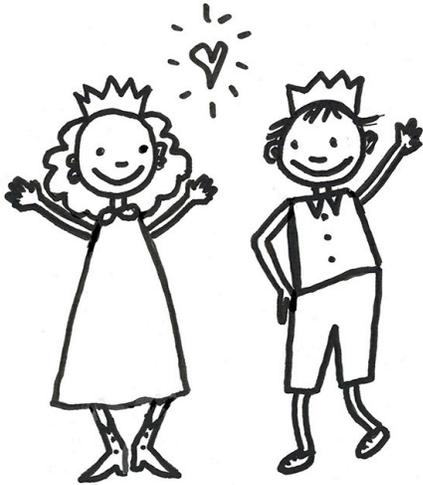
PS “The evil villain” can sometimes be a misguided bully or a cranky neighbor or some kind of nemesis/antagonist that must be battled or made peace with throughout the story.

This is the Nurturer, the Helper, the Fairy Godmother, the Grandmother, the Teacher, the Merlin or the Giver.

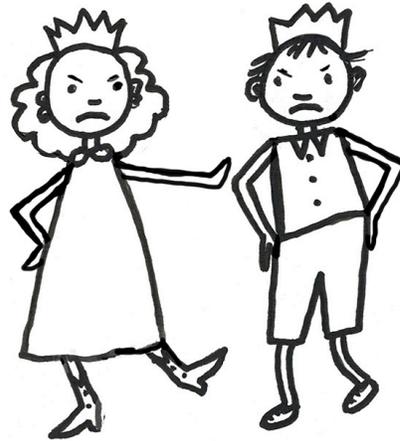
The authority figure: the king or queen, the ruler, the parent, the principal, the one in charge for good or bad.



The prince or princess as romantic foils.



The prince or princess as spoiled brat.



There are many more archetypes. Think about these types of archetypal characters as character traits and start writing your own list of archetypes to draw on when developing or modeling your characters. Researching mythology is a nifty thing to do as well. If you look at J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter stories, you'll see how she uses archetypes and mythology a tremendous amount in building both her plots and characters.



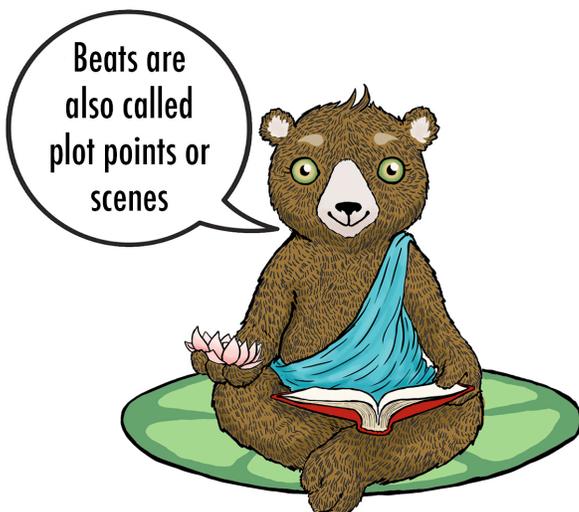
Assonance

Here, inner vowels match, making them sound GREAT.



Beats

The different scenes of your story are sometimes referred to as beats and are often outlined in bullet points. The terms beats and scenes are used more with novels and screenplays and plot points with picture books.



Climax

This is the high point in the story where the main character battles the monster, makes the friend, outwits the bully, or gets the treasured bicycle and solves the problem. It is the most exciting and dramatic moment in the story so far.



Consonance

Here, consonant sounds match with pleasurable sounding results.

Mom's face was blank as she faced the
sink.



Contradiction

A contradiction is when two conflicting ideas are presented together. In children's books, this is used to good effect when the images and text contradict each other like in the book *Phooey!* by Marc Rosenthal, where the main character keeps talking about how boring everything is while we, the viewers, see all these incredibly exciting things happening around him that he's oblivious to.



Ellipses

Ellipses are a series of three or four periods in a row that show the reader that an idea or thought continues, or in the case of a quote, that a section is missing. Ellipses can be great for page turns such as in "*Except if...*" by Jim Averbek.



Emotion

Emotion is critical in fiction children's books. Make us feel for your story. Make us care by showing in actions, not telling in words, how the characters feel or by convincing us through actions and examples how important the subject is, especially if it's nonfiction. Kids feel things strongly. Convey that in your writing through actions that show feelings rather than just telling us about them.



The question here is why should kids care about your story? Connect with emotion by making us laugh, or cry, or be afraid for our hero. Make us care for what your characters are going through. How do you make the reader emotionally invest in your story?



Engage

You want to engage the reader either with questions (not too many) suspense, drama, humor, sense of beauty, curiosity, exquisite language, and emotions to connect with the child's experience or feelings in some way. Think in terms of a child's world and what things are most important and compelling to them and then build on that.



Epiphany



The epiphany is the “**aha**” moment when the main character finally figures out how to solve the problem. Sometimes called the Turning Point. Sometimes, it’s a really big moment and other times it’s a really small moment. Go figure! The epiphany or turning point happens just before the climax and is the moment or experience that enables the climax to happen. Usually the epiphany happens just after the darkest moment or low point in the story when the hero has tried and failed and is just about to give up. Sometimes it’s because the main character thinks something based on what they’ve learned so far, other times it’s brought about by actions such as stumbling onto something. Using action in your writing is always better if you can pull it off.



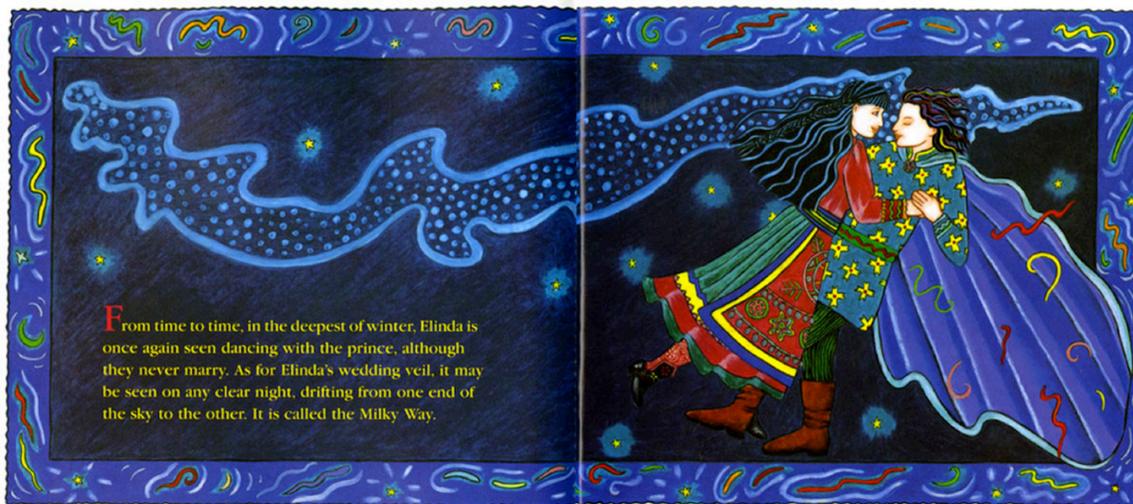
Euphemism

This is a word or saying that stands in for something that's more difficult to say directly. Euphemisms are usually used with sex or death or bodily functions as in our example, or "your grandfather passed" rather than he died, or "Daddy's been let go at work" rather than "Daddy was fired". The point of using a euphemism is to soften the edges. As a fun exercise, see if you can create a list of euphemisms and make a story out of them.



Fiction

Fictional stories include imaginary/made up characters and made-up events and are usually plot-driven (don't worry we'll be talking about plot when we get to P). ☺ Sometimes the characters and events are true but the dialogue has been made up. This is called historical fiction. Some people like to mix and match fiction and nonfiction and call it faction, but not all editors respond well to this term so I would avoid it.



Foreshadowing

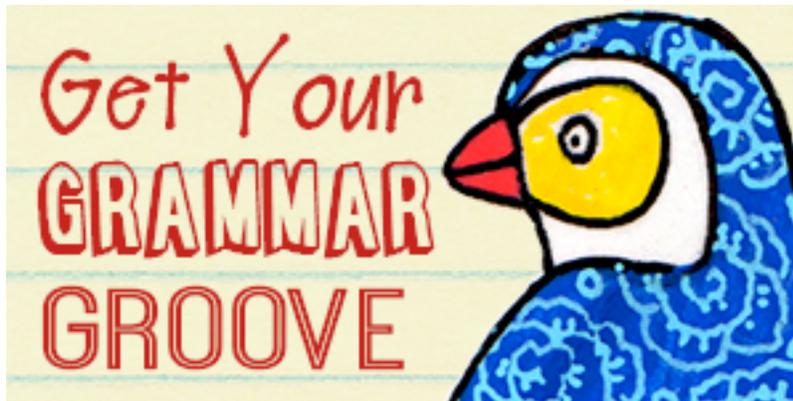
Provides a hint of what is to come later in a story. You never want to include a character that doesn't play a role in the story, especially in picture books where every word is precious and perfect. But you can introduce a character early on, perhaps lurking in the background, and then they show up later on. Sometimes a character breaks a vase early on but later on their clumsiness causes something really important to happen and we already have a clue that they are clumsy.



Grammar

Good grammar (how you construct sentences and use punctuation) and proper formatting are essential in all writing to show that you are professional. While these two things are way too much to go into right now, we have an awesome and memorable course on these from rocketing kid's book author and grammar expert Miranda Paul right here.

<http://www.childrensbookacademy.com/get-your-grammar-groove.html>



High Concept

A high concept manuscript is a story with lots of commercial potential (big sales) that can be summed up in one sentence: e.g., Super Ninja Bunny Versus the Alien Bots – a rabbit with special powers who saves his class from robot aliens.

The Hook

The hook is the beginning of the story that hooks the reader in with a question, a problem, a great desire, fabulous language, or a curiosity that makes the reader just have to read more. If your



reader doesn't want to read on, your ship is sunk. Here are some truly wonderful hooks that are a little on the dark side.

“Where’s Papa going with that axe?’ said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.” - *Charlotte’s Web*

“If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book.”- *A Series of Unfortunate Events: The Bad Beginning*

And remember way back when we were at “Engage”? Those are all hooks:



Hyperbole

This is when you exaggerate things for a much greater effect!



The Boy



The Most Evil Boy in the World



Irony

Irony is best described as the exact opposite of what you are actually saying, said with a snarky

or sarcastic tone. Or something happens that is the last thing expected, such as in the example above.



Like when you sign a lousy contract and then 10 other offers come in!

Jargon

Jargon is language that can be particular to a certain kind of trade or professional and is often a commonly used cliché or trite expression.

Some examples are saying things like:
Don't be such a **drama queen**
or
How about we think **outside the box**?!



Sometimes jargon can be fun if that's the kind of character that you are creating where they say cliché things all the time.



Metaphor

(So important, we're explaining again.) This is when two unlike things are used to complement each other.

Most editors love metaphors because if they are done well, they can be really fun or they can help create truly lyrical exquisite language. But once again, don't overdo them.



Onomatopoeia

When you use fun words that sound like what they are describing.

Achoo! Beep! Eek! Ahem!
Click! Crackle! Bam
Crunch! Ding! Bonk!



Pitch

The pitch is the brief one or two line description of your story that makes the agent or editor want to read more. It's usually 60-100 words, no more, and is sometimes called an elevator pitch because of its brevity. You generally want to leave the editor wanting more so that they will want to keep reading to find out more. Hooks sometimes make good pitches.

Plot

Starts with a hook, which is a problem or great desire that sets up a great curiosity, followed by a series of sequential obstacles that cause the main character to grow to the point where they have an epiphany, which enables the main character to solve the problem or achieve their great desire, followed by the denouement, which is a winding down showing the wonderful consequences of the hero's journey and then ending with a fun or intriguing twist at the end!





1st
Person
Point of View is
from the
main
character's POV
using words like:
**I, Me,
My, Mine.**

Point of View

Point of view is best described as the way the author allows you to **hear** and **see** what is going on.

First Person Point of View– This is when the main character is telling the story.

Second Person Point of View– This is also commonly used point of view in which the narrator talks to the reader directly using words like **you** and **your**.

Some great 2nd Person POV Kid's Books:

How to Babysit Grandpa, by Jean Reagan

Don't Push That Button, by Bill Cotter

Warning: Do Not Open This Book, by Adam Lehrhaupt

The Book That Eats People, by John Perry

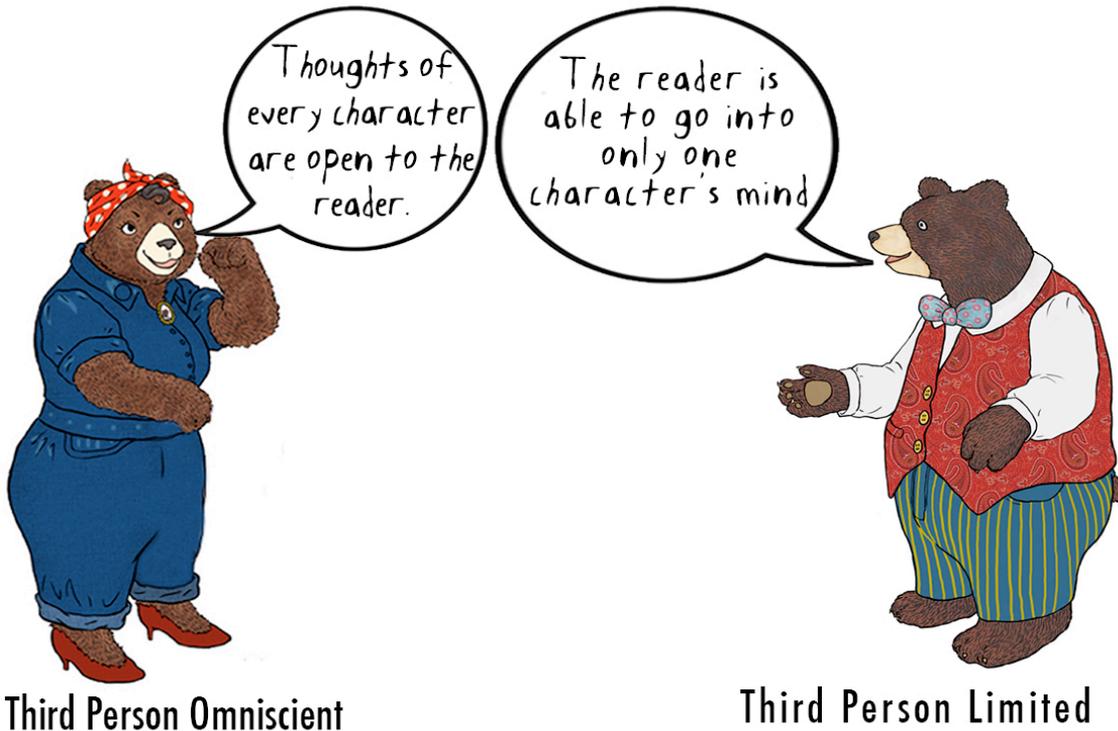
I'm talking
to you!



Third Person Point of View–This is the view from the perspective of an outsider looking at the action.



...and there are two types:



Prediction

This is a wonderful literary device that kids (and teachers) love where you set the story up so that some elements repeat and the kids can guess what they are and join in like in one of my books *Baby Rattlesnake* <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2806> *Baby Rattlesnake* makes a rattle sound whenever he gets excited or delighted and kids love joining in. Another aspect of prediction is when the kids can guess what's coming next. The first example that I gave could also be filed under refrain but I've always used it as a predictive element in doing school visits.



Protagonist



Other wise known as the **Main Character**, this leading role is for the character that takes charge of your story, goes on some kind of journey and solves the problem.

Just like Boris!

Query Letters and Cover Letters

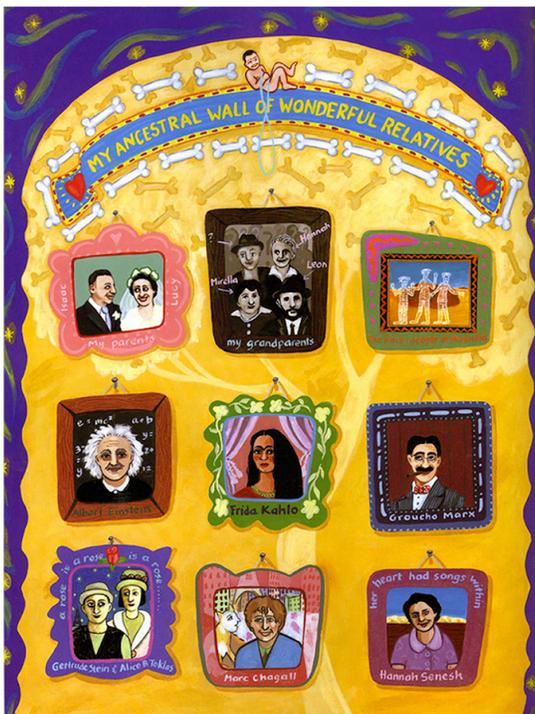
Query letters are when we query an agent or editor and ask them if they're interested in seeing your work. With a query letter you want to make it as beautifully written as possible and specify why you are approaching that agent or editor. You want to include a brief bio that includes any kind of relevant information about any expertise that you might have in either the writing field and/or your subject matter (degrees, what you do for a living if relevant, any prior publications).



You also want to include a juicy intriguing pitch for your story that makes them want to contact you back to find out more and allude to some comparable books if possible with why your book is new, more appropriate for them, and/or better .

A cover letter is very similar but with a trade cover letter you also include the full picture book manuscript or the first 5-10 pages of your properly formatted novel depending on what they specify for their submission policies.

Always check submission policies before submitting. You can nearly always do this by checking on the publisher's or agent's website first.



Resonance

This is the ability to evoke emotions for a particular character or group of characters.

Just like an old photograph can evoke an emotion causing you to reminisce about times gone by...a character can have something bring old feelings to the surface as well.



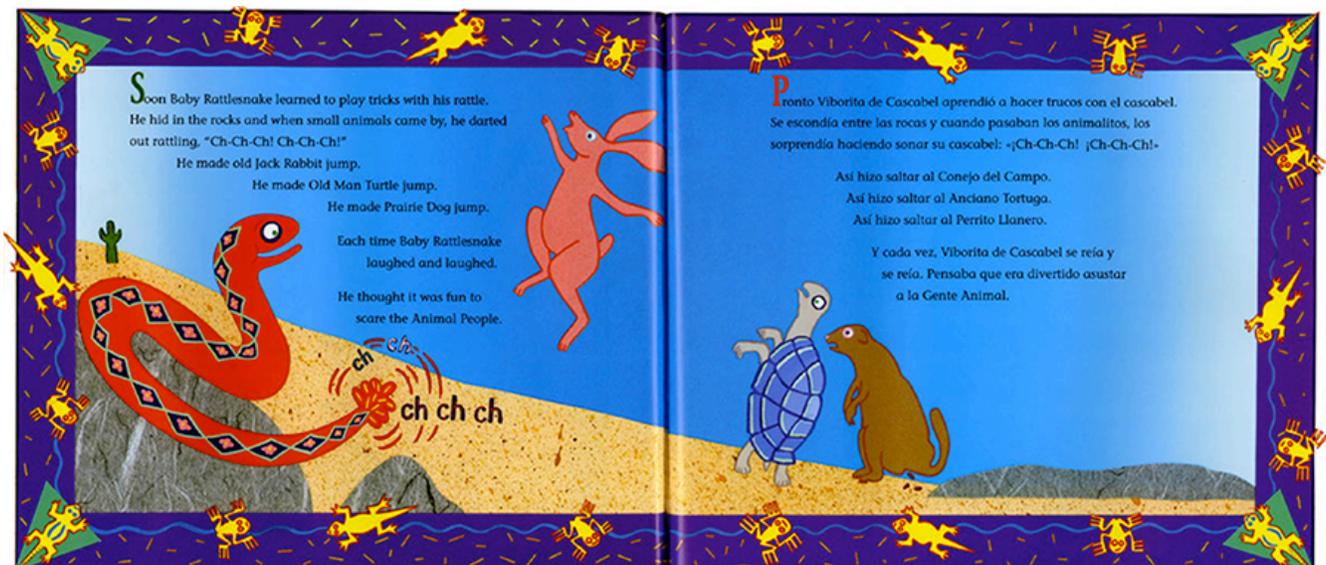
Red Herring

This is a clue or a hint in a story that is supposed to throw the reader off and confuse their idea of how the story will end up. It makes the story less predictable and much more exciting.



Repetition

Repeating words or lines like *Except if...* from Jim Averbeck's picture book "Except if..." or Baby Rattlesnake danced a rattle dance, "Ch, Ch, Ch, Ch, Ch, Ch!" from *Baby Rattlesnake* illustrated by yours truly. This can also be called a refrain.



By repeating words you are drawing the reader in and having them really put themselves in the story with the sounds that are developing around your characters.

Rhythmic Language

This is all about syllables (which is a unit of language—Eg. The word hummingbird has **three syllables**) and meter (which is the rhythm created by the words used) , where certain syllables are stressed to create a rhythm.



Sensory

Using language that evokes the senses can add lots more depth and dimension to a story.



Momma marveled at his beauty. She listened to the sound of his breathing. She felt the softness of his skin and smelled his baby smell. She was tempted to lick him, but she didn't for fear that someone would catch her.



Simile

(Another very important one! So here it is again)

Similes are metaphors or direct comparisons of two unlike things using the words “like” or “as”.



She felt like a butterfly floating from flower to flower as she danced with each boy.



Show Don't Tell

Showing with your writing creates a mental pictures in the reader's mind. When readers get to imagine, they are more engaged in the writer's story than if they are told something in a flat way.

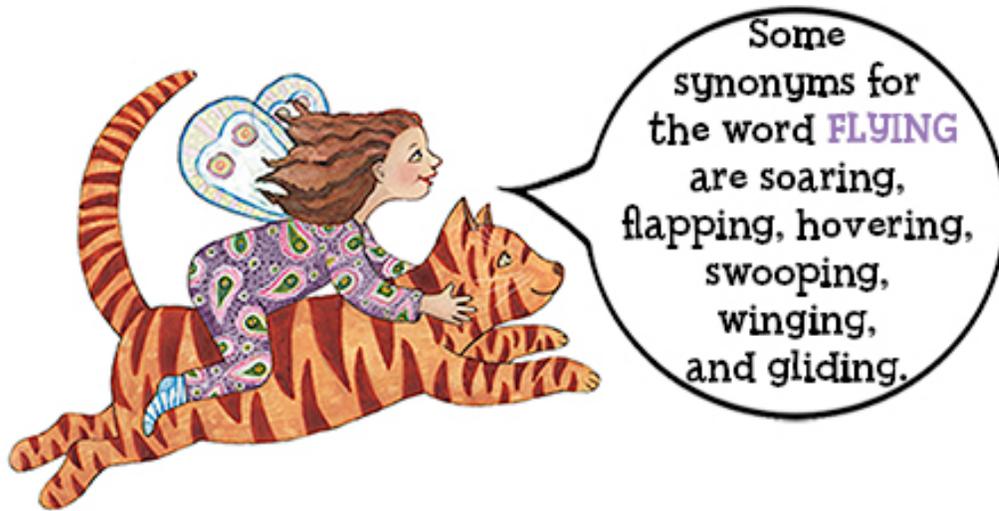
Instead of saying, "The party was amazing!", say....



Synonym

A word having the same meaning, or nearly the same, as another word.





Syntax

How you string words together in a sentence. For example, because English is my 2nd language, if I'm tired, I'll sometimes say... (see image)



...rather than, **"Who is that actress in the film?"**

The awkward first question structure is constructed more like my first language Yiddish. You can use syntax to good effect in creating distinctive voices for your characters.



Tone

You create tone with the attitude that your characters, your setting, and your plot embody, created by the language and pacing that you use, providing an overall feel for your story.



PLAYFUL



SCARY



RELAXED

Understatement

Similar but different than euphemism, understatement is when your character says something with pronounced under-enthusiasm. It's often used in an ironic way.

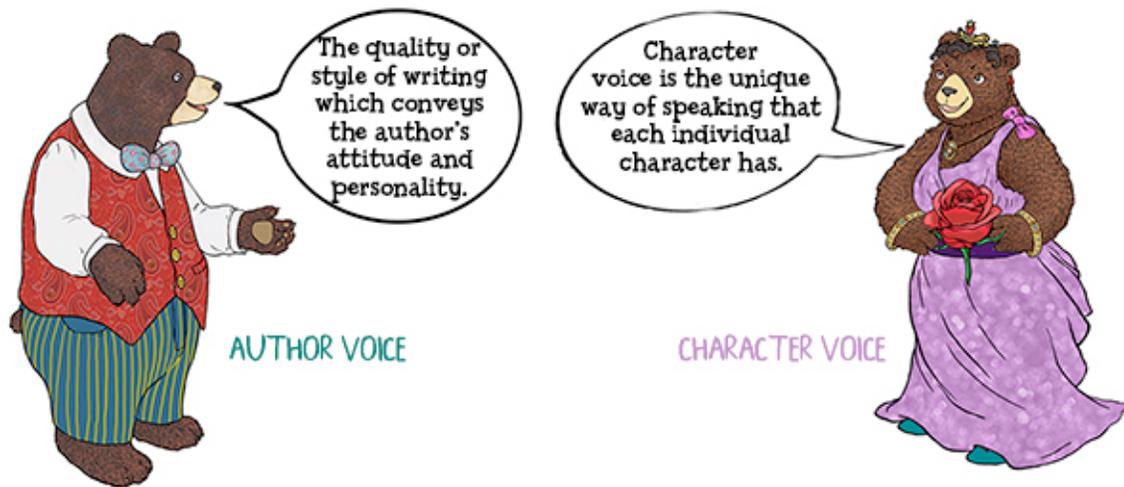


Vernacular Language

This is the language that is commonly used in a particular place. With vernacular language comes *Colloquialism*, which is a saying that expresses something other than its literal meaning. Vernacular language can be gobs of fun (Australian).

Voice

There are two voices in writing;



Make sure to differentiate yours with things like syntax, specific mannerisms that a particular character might have when speaking either physically or verbally like saying “But, but...” each time before they speak.



Work for Hire and Royalty Publishing

There are essentially two kinds of publishing contracts. Work for hire (WFH), which is a flat fee and often involves the purchase of all rights (magazine, foreign, digital etc.) and royalty contracts where you get paid an advance against books that will be sold in the future. Once that amount gets paid back, you'll get royalty payments and statements, usually twice a year that are an agreed upon percentage of either the cover price (gross) or net (after expenses). I used to be against WFH but have since learned that WFH contracts can be fantastic for building a body of work, earning income, building a writing resume, and developing writing skills. WFH usually occurs with educational publishers but it also happens with trade publishers as well. We have a fantastic course on writing for WFH, Trade, Magazines, and Educational publishers right here

<http://www.childrensbookacademy.com/writing-for-love-and-money.html> We also go into contracts in our flagship Craft and

Business of Writing Children's Picture Books course here

<http://www.childrensbookacademy.com/writing-childrens-picture-books.html>

So now we are coming to the end of the alphabet, which as you know can be quite challenging for the writer, so I'm going to fudge a little just for fun.



eXtra Special

Children's book publishing is very competitive so you want to make sure that your manuscript is extra special. How do you do that? By using all the techniques and tools that you've learned in this book or better yet taking one of our fabulous proven track-record courses where you will get to explore these concepts on a much deeper level as we walk you through step-by-step writing your manuscript and submitting it effectively.

whY

Why do you want to write for kids. If it's because it's always been a dream for you to write and publish – go for it. If you love kids and want to help them and make a better world – go for it. If you are obsessed or passionate about a certain topic – go for it. If you feel any of these and want to earn some extra income – go for it. But if you want to get rich, this is not the thing for you. Many people earn an income from this, especially if they supplement or focus on WFH or educational work. Some have gotten rich, but the majority do not, so if this is your main motivation, I would strongly encourage you to not do this, even though it's fun and wonderful.



Zenith

The zenith is the penultimate high point of something, the top of a mountain, the climax in your story or the highpoint. We like to think of our courses in this way as the best of the best. Here are some that we'd like to share with you. We hope that you've really enjoyed this book and learned LOTS from it. We also hope that we can continue the journey with you. If you'd like to sign up to receive information on free webinars, early birds specials and other goodies click this link ☺ <http://bit.ly/CBAtribe>



If you enjoyed this book...

...which I hope you did, please check out some of our courses at the Children's Book Academy! All courses are either interactive or self-paced e-Courses that are taught by some of the best in the children's book industry.

The Craft and Business of Writing Children's Picture Books

Learn how to successfully write and publish children's books with Dr. Mira Reisberg and another industry expert co-teaching. This course features an extraordinary faculty that you won't find in any other course! Follow this link to find out more!

<http://bit.ly/cbwpb>

The Craft and Business of Illustrating Children's Books

This is the equivalent to the Craft and Business of Writing Children's Picture Books (but with added information about chapter book, middle grade, and graphic novel illustration) for adventures writers and fearful beginners to award-winning illustrators – it will blow you away! Here's the link!

<http://bit.ly/ZVVAib>



The Hero's Art Journey

Ever wanted to access your creativity and learn easy and fun art making techniques that you never thought you could do!? You will not only learn about yourself, but also your strengths and how to claim your power as a creative. Find out more by following this link <http://bit.ly/1L3UG7J>

Writing for Love and Money

If you always wanted to know how to make an extra income from writing children's books, then look no further! This course teaches you all the secrets of how to make your writing appealing to agents and editors, how to access markets that most writers don't know how to approach, and also how to get signed! (And it really works!) To see how click this link <http://bit.ly/1TeOBla>

Self-Publishing and Crowdfunding

If you have the story, we have the knowledge to help you get that story out into the world as a well-written (and beautifully illustrated - if it's a picture book) book. Get all the knowledge to do it all yourself and do it with this amazing course. Find out more here <http://bit.ly/1BOUc20>

We also have some fabulous courses that you can take on-demand right here:



Get Your Grammar Groove

Good grammar is essential to being a good writer. This course by the great Miranda Paul teaches you how to be a grammar guru, how to format correctly, and how to make your writing more exciting. <http://bit.ly/1H4PWxt>

Writing Wonderful Character-Driven Stories

Co-taught by multi-published award-winner Marsha Diane Arnold and Mira Reisberg, this course focuses on the important topic of writing character-driven picture books but the principles apply to all levels. <http://bit.ly/1KPIZiO>

Photoshop for Illustrators AKA Fun with Photoshop

Taught by the fabulous Leda Chung this course will open all sorts of doors for both very beginning to advanced Photoshop users. It's a two-parter that starts with the basics while the 2nd part has more advanced techniques. The best part of this course is that it teaches you how to make art with Photoshop that doesn't look like it was made with Photoshop!

<http://bit.ly/1f5F85H>

Mastering Scrivener AKA Rock Your Writing with Scrivener

Scrivener is the professional writer's go-to tool for writing and organizing your many drafts, related websites, related images, submissions records and so much more all in one handy dandy place!! This course even features a bonus on how to do citations in Scrivener for nonfiction writers. Taught by Scrivener mistress Catherine Felt, there's nothing out there that will make your writing easier and more manageable.

<http://bit.ly/1TlQJQY>



Make Your Own Easy Peasy Awesome Author or Illustrator Website

I think this pretty much says it all but we make it really easy by teaching you this instantly gratifying and inexpensive or free website building software <http://bit.ly/1IJsDW7>

That's it for now. I hope you've enjoyed this book and learning about our offerings ☺

Don't forget to join our tribe to get free webinars and other goodies and we'd love it if you'd help spread the word about us and be a Children's Book Academy Ambassador!

<http://bit.ly/CBAtribe>

