

## Sue Beckhorn's Advice for Would-Be Children's Writers and Illustrators

We all have to start somewhere. It is logical to ask someone already working in the field to critique your work or help you get published too. Can I guide you? Yipes! After three picture books, two middle grade novels, a YA novel, and another middle grade on the way in 2016, I still haven't gotten rich or famous and it's still hard to get that next contract! I still struggle to sell my work. I have come to the conclusion that I write because the writing pleases/satisfies/makes me happy, not for fame or fortune. I do know that the depression of my early writing years has lifted because of my small publishing successes, and I will go to my grave a much more contented person because I have created my books.

I will confess here that at the first conference I ever went to, I actually asked Katherine Patterson to read a novel manuscript! She very sweetly declined. Sorry, we can't do that. We just don't have time. There are people who will critique manuscripts for a fee, and many resources you can consult.

The hard, cold truth is that it's a very competitive, difficult field to break into. A lot of people would like to write or illustrate for kids. Some actually think it might be easy, but as Jane Yolen, I believe, has said: writing for children is about as easy as raising them! So number one, don't give up your day job until you make the New York Times Bestseller list!

You should join [www.scbwi.org](http://www.scbwi.org) (society of children's book writers and illustrators). You don't have to be published to be a member. One of the best pieces of advice I've ever had was to get myself to conferences. SCBWI hosts lots of them, also the [www.highlightsfoundation.org](http://www.highlightsfoundation.org). Both are great. Don't shoot too high at first. Non-fiction is a much easier market to crack than fiction. Your local newspaper might publish your features or book reviews, creating the start of a track record that you can show when you submit to other publishers. That's where I started—at fifty cents per inch for the Wellsville Daily Reporter—but it was darned nice when people I met on the street commented on my articles. The Highlights people say that one "in" to their magazine is to submit crafts projects or other shorts for them. Research publishers and agents online, or through the *Writers Market* book which comes out annually and is available at most big book stores. Start writing and submitting. Try to get an agent. It's not a magic fix, but it helps—sometimes a lot. You might consider buying manila envelopes by the box and even addressing the next one to be ready to send out when the first submission is rejected!

Two things I've had to work on in my writing are voice and getting out of the bad habit of *telling* scenes rather than just getting in there and making it happen. Dialog is really important as well. It's one of the best tools for carving a 3D character.

When illustrating, you should look at a LOT of picture books. Most of them are created in a 32 page format, some more some less, but always in multiples of eight because of the printing process. Within that format, there's room for tinkering, but *something has to go on every page!* When you submit your work to a publisher or agent, you should have a presentable dummy of sketches giving an idea of how the book will look. You only need to submit two or three PHOTOCOPIES of finished drawings or paintings. (Never send original artwork unless it is under contract.) An editor may ask for lots of changes, so finishing all the artwork before submission isn't necessary or particularly advisable. Try lots of interesting angles and make sure your characters are drawn consistently throughout. Avoid putting important details near the inner edge of pages (the gutter). The important things to remember: odd #s go on the right and even #s go on the left page. The story starts on pp 4/5 and p 32 is THE END, illustrated, of course. Try to create a

pattern using spreads, single page pictures and vignettes with the text thoughtfully placed. The art director may ask for lots of changes but at least you'll have exercised your design ability.

You might sketch out the pages on 11x17, folded in half and numbered. Then take it apart, photocopy it backsie/frontsie, and put it back together to create a book-like dummy. It helps to make a thumbnail dummy first all on 1 or 2 sheets of paper, so you can see how each page relates.

Lastly, NEVER GIVE UP. It's a game of persistence as well as talent and hard work. Three sayings I go by are: *If you throw enough spaghetti at a wall, some of it will stick*, *God doesn't give us the desire without the ability*, and *Writing and illustrating are 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration*. See you in print! Good luck!

Best,  
Sue

Reading List:

*On Writing* by Stephen King

*Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott

*Take Joy* by Jane Yolen

*The Artist's Way, A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity* by Julia Cameron

There are many helpful websites and free email newsletters. Here's a few:

[www.childrenswriter.com](http://www.childrenswriter.com)

[www.institutechildrenslit.com](http://www.institutechildrenslit.com)

[www.kathytemean.wordpress.com](http://www.kathytemean.wordpress.com)