How to Become a Millionaire Children's Author

LESSON EIGHT

by

Scott Thornton

You do not need any previous writing experience!

Use these professional techniques and insider secrets and tips to easily write page-turning stories with the WOW factor, and join the growing legion of millionaire authors.

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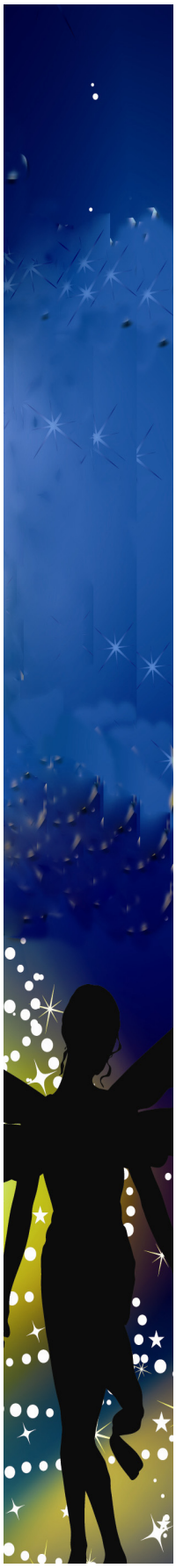


Welcome and a huge ‘Thank You’ for purchasing ‘Lesson Eight’ of the twelve part course, ‘How to Become a Millionaire Children’s Author’.

Let’s continue with the hottest and latest insider tips and techniques you can use to build your own personal wealth from writing for children.

Writing for Seven to Twelve Year Olds

This is the age bracket when children who have discovered the delights of books become voracious readers. They have an amazing ability to immerse themselves in whatever imaginary world they are reading about, expanding their horizons and seeking, in their reading, the adventures that are so hard to find in the ultra-safe modern world.

As a result, **there is a constant need for new books to satisfy this market**, and publishers are always pleased to receive manuscripts from competent new writers.

As in all areas of writing for children, different publishers split the age-groupings at different points. Obviously some children are slower to acquire reading fluency, but you can assume that eight year olds can cope with three-syllable words and sentences broken up by commas, and ten year olds can manage an almost adult level of language.

Top Insider Tip…

There is a method of working out the suitability of a piece of writing for any given age band. It was devised by educational psychologists and is called the **'Fog Index'**.

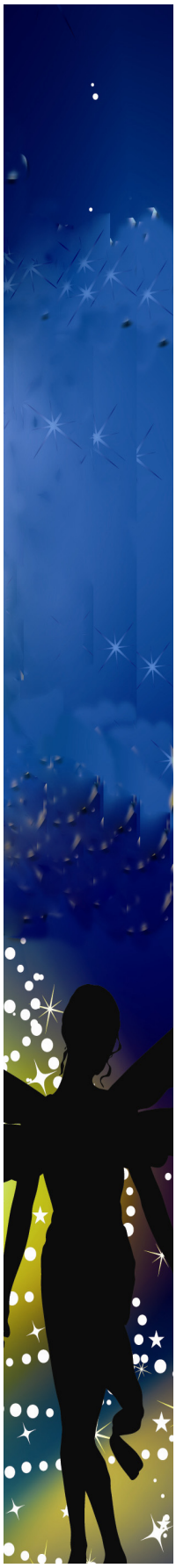
It works like this:

- Take some random samples of about 100 words, (hyphenated words count as one word) and for each sample, count the exact number of words and divide it by the number of sentences to get the average number of words per sentence.
- Then count the number of long words - that is words of three syllables or more. Add the number of long words to the average words per sentence.
- Multiply the result by 0.4.

This will give you a figure that corresponds with the age of the average reader able to cope with that level of writing.

For example, a randomly chosen paragraph from Robert Westall's 'Yaxley's Cat' (Macmillan) gave the following result:

- 125 words divided by 8 sentences = 15.6 average words per sentence.
- 15.6 plus 8 long words = 23.6.



- Multiplied by 0.4 = 9.5, in other words, a reading age of nine to ten, which is about right for this book.

The point of doing this is to check that the level of complexity of your writing gives **an approximate reading age that corresponds with the age of your main characters**. Whatever age they are, children like to read about characters who are the **same age as them,** or slightly older. Children do not want to read about characters younger than themselves (even slightly younger).

At the same time, while children at the top of this age band are happy to have their vocabulary enlarged with new words, you will put off younger readers if they find the writing too difficult.

So, provided that the reading age and character age approximately match, and the overall length is appropriate, you don't need to worry too much about precisely which category your publisher will put your book into.

A well-written story is acceptable on its own merit, and which section of the catalogue it goes in is almost academic from your point of view.

How Long Should Your Book Be?

The rule on length is simple: young children, short books; older children, longer books. Children prefer books that they can finish in no more than two longish sittings.

Here are the normal lengths:

- Books for seven and eight year olds start at about 10,000 words
- Books for sub-teens are about 35,000 words.

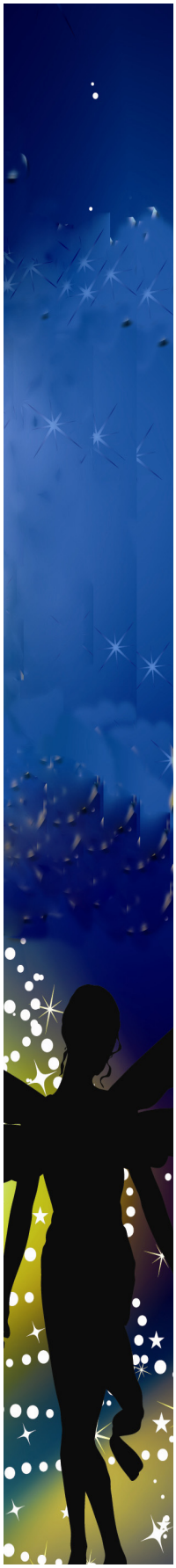
Before you start writing, don't forget to spend some of your research time on checking the length of book currently being published for children of the age you are aiming at.

As you know the 'Harry Potter' books break this mould. For the age range, the books should have been about 35,000 words. In fact **'Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone'** is about 55,000 words and after the third book, they are even longer. As stated before – there is always the exception.

However, you will find that most publishers, whatever they call their version of the category, will produce books of roughly the same length. This is not only tied up with how long they believe children want to take reading a book, but with costs.

The Market Place

The selling price of a book is calculated from its production cost, so a longer book will have to sell for more than a short one. This can create an



insurmountable problem if the production costs dictate a selling price of £7.99 when all the other books for that age band are priced at £5.99.

This doesn't mean that you have to worry about going a couple of thousand words over. 37,000 words can fairly easily be reduced to 35,000 by some judicious rewriting and perhaps dropping a couple of non-essential scenes. Even 12,000 can be acceptable when it should be 10,000, by a combination of pruning the text and using smaller illustrations.

But you can't fit 20,000 words into a 10,000 range, and although there might be nothing else wrong with it, **a manuscript of this length would not be acceptable for the younger end of the age band.**

A few publishers offer books for seven year olds that can be read to them by adults, but most assume that by this age, children will be reading on their own. They categorise the books as 'beginner readers' or 'read alone'.

Illustrations for Seven to Twelve Year Olds

The purpose of illustrations for this age range is not the same as for younger children.

Here are the guidelines:

- Illustrations in picture books for younger children **form part of the story-telling.**
- Illustrations in books for seven to twelve year olds are not part of the story-telling, they only **enhance the story**.

They are also usually black and white illustrations.

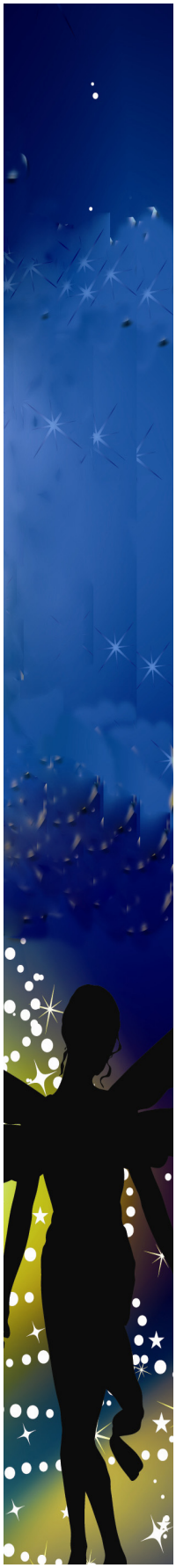
There are basically two formats:

- An illustration on each chapter page.
- An illustration on each chapter page and the rest occupying half or third pages throughout the book – about thirty illustrations in all.

The stories themselves can be on almost any subject except romance, although even that is introduced in the American series **'Sweet Valley Twins'** (Bantam).

In **'Big Brother in Love'** by **Francine Pascal**, it is not the main young characters themselves who fall in love, but their older brother, as the title indicates, and when his romance ends they decide to help him get over it. Romance does not interest children in the seven to twelve year bracket. **Members of the opposite sex are usually targets of derision, rather than objects of love!**

Storylines seem to be evenly divided between situations that will be familiar to the readers, such as stories about school, families and pets; and stories that



encourage them to use their imagination, such as adventures, mysteries or fantasy.

This is also the age when children start enjoying stories of anarchic humour. Nothing pleases them more than slapstick humour, and best of all are stories where figures of authority end up in the mire - ideally mire of a particularly gross nature!

For the youngest of these readers, a good example is **Tony Bradman's** tremendously successful series about Dilly, the world's naughtiest dinosaur. Narrated by his bigger sister, these are stories of Dilly's various escapades, such as winning a prize at the pet show with his pet swamp lizard, or meeting a tiger.

These books are full of **nice touches that link them to the world modern children know**, such as this episode when Dilly and his sister go into the toy-shop, and look at a display of dinosaur dolls:

"I went over to a big display of dinosaur dolls with Father. The one I liked best was Dindy. You can buy lots of different clothes to dress her up in, and special ribbons for her tail."

Details of the Modern World

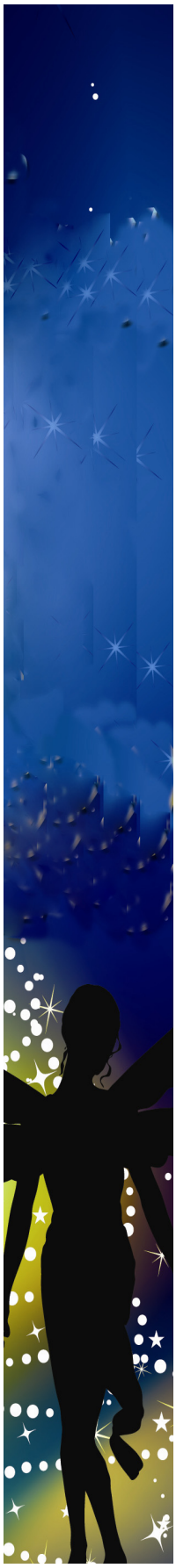
Your readers are going to think it very strange if your modern characters don't wear printed T-shirts and fashionable trainers and play computer games, so don't forget to include them if you can do so without dating the book. E.g. it's probably safe to have them playing a computer game with a name you invent – but don't have them playing TombRaider, Grand Theft Auto or any other named game! By the time the book is printed, these will be very 'yesterday' and after just five years they will seem ancient.

In **'Betsey Biggalow is Here!'** by **Malorie Blackman** (Piccadilly) there is a big row about trainers between Betsey and her grandmother - a situation that will be familiar to many young readers.

Also by **Tony Bradman, 'Revenge at Ryan's Reef'** (Young Puffin) is part of a series about the Bluebeard family who, in this book, visit Granny at the Dunsailin' retirement home, only to find that it has been taken over by the sinister Uriah Creep.

In another series by **Tony Bradman,** about Tommy Niner the astronaut (Viking 'Kites' series) **'Tommy Niner and the Mystery Spaceship'**, Tommy and his grandfather investigate an invisible spaceship, only to find that it contains the galaxy's vilest criminal and her crew - deep frozen. Then Granddad fiddles with the controls and the temperature starts to rise...

In Young Puffin's Read Alone category, **Chris Powling's 'The Conker as Hard as a Diamond'** is about Little Alpesh, who wishes he had a conker



tough enough to beat his friends. Then he meets a mysterious ghostly park-keeper who gives him a conker. It is what he had been wishing for, but he hadn't bargained for what it will do....

In **'The Tale of Anabelle Hedgehog'** by **Stephen Lawhead** (Lion) a dog menaces the riverbank, and Anabelle decides to do something about it. The author writes from multiple viewpoints (which as you know is unusual for this age group) but the book is still an easy read. The animals have no clothes, but talk and think like humans and Anabelle herself is a brave and likeable character.

Humour

'Sir Gadabout' by **Martyn Beardsley** (Dent) is **a good example of anarchic humour**. Sir Gadabout is the worst knight in the world. He is one of the knights of the Round Table, but if you haven't heard of him before it's because none of his adventures ever ran smoothly enough to get him into the history books. This is the story of his calamitous, but eventually successful, quest to save fair Guinevere from the grip of a wicked witch.

For those children who are discovering the joys of language, **'Fowl Pest'** by **James Andrew Hall** (Red Fox) is about a girl who wants to be a chicken, and is full of wacky humour and linguistic jokes.

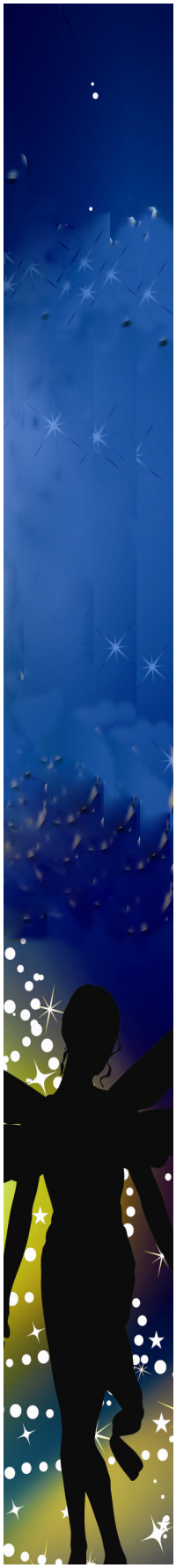
Another example of humour, for slightly older children, is **'Denzil the Dog-Polisher'** by **Andrew Matthews** (Mammoth). The Wicked Wizard of the Western Waste curses the village of Pudsey with woe, woe and more woe. Most cursed of all are Nicola, Kelly and Sarah, the three dismal damsels, the wizard's nieces. When Denzil the Dog-Polisher and his talking dog Jack arrive in the village, he breaks the curse and makes everybody happy.

Justice and Revenge

Whilst readers of this age like to see adults get into trouble on their own, they prefer young characters to receive their comeuppance at the hands of the main characters, not at the hands of adults.

In **'Disaster with the Fiend'** by **Sheila Lavelle** (Hamish Hamilton), the fiend is Angela, who lives next door to Charlie (Charlotte). Angela is a practical joker; for instance she thinks it is fun to offer people cakes filled with shaving-cream, or tell Charlie that the party they are going to is fancy dress when it is not. Charlie finally gets fed up with it and decides to have her revenge. Sheila Lavelle's verbal imagery is particularly good - she describes one of the characters as 'going as pink as toilet paper'.

Another example of comeuppance, this time with animals, is **'Ace'** by **Dick King-Smith** (Gollancz). Named Ace by the farmer because he has a mark like the ace of clubs, the hero is a pig who understands what humans say. He lives on a farm with various animals, including a wise old nanny goat, a cat, and a



corgi with pretensions of grandeur because of the Royal corgis. Ace makes his way into the farmhouse where he spends his afternoons watching TV and finally puts the snooty corgi in her place.

Revenge can also come from other sources. **'The Long-Loan Llama'** is one of a series about the City Farm by **Judy Allen** (Red Fox). The City Farm is lent a llama and the young helpers wonder whether it will be a success, until it tames a particularly ghastly disruptive small boy visitor by spitting at him.

For slightly older readers, **John Cunliffe's 'Giant Stories'** (Young Hippo) is a collection of nine original stories about giants in the world of ordinary people. Some are heroes, some troublemakers, some smelly or sniffely, sad or happy, but all are great fun. The whole book is about 30,000 words, but each story, at around 3000 words, can be read at one sitting.

Adventure

'Aunt Augusta's Elephant' by **Geoffrey Trease** (Piper) is a straightforward adventure story. Whilst clearing out their great-aunt's flat in Bath, Nicola and Tim discover an amazing enamel egg, wrapped in a yellowing silk scarf. It's the most beautiful thing they have ever seen, but they don't know then how much trouble the egg is going to cause, not how it would change their lives forever.

'Shrubbery Skulduggery' by **Rebecca Lisle** (Doubleday) is a good example of the light-hearted adventure involving witches and spells. Polly's parents are going abroad and she goes to stay with her aunts at The Shrubbery. The full-time gardener, Miss Gargoyle, is very strange, and it soon becomes plain that something sinister is going on, what with missing uncles and bats in the wardrobe.

Witches and Wizards

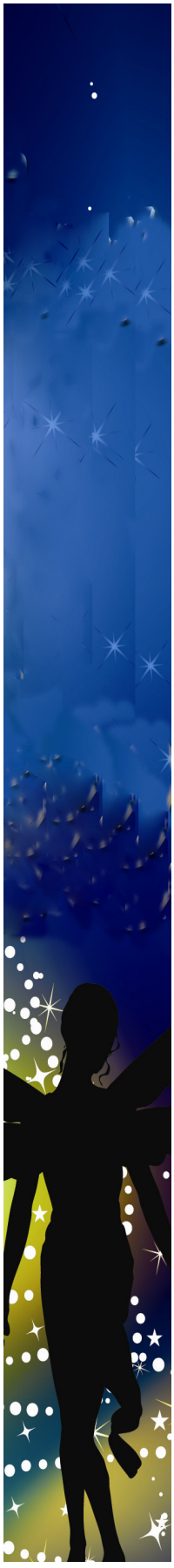
Stories about witches and wizards are very popular with the seven to ten age group. Whilst some books are about sinister spell-casters, many of these, like **'Shrubbery Skulduggery'**, tend to be humorous rather than horrific.

On the sinister side, 'The Witches Revenge' by **Nigel Hinton** (Abelard) is about a witch who is angry at her failure to take over the beaver's home, Beaver Towers.

Social and Environmental Issues

Stories for sub-teenage readers now often include, or are centred on, themes of social responsibility and ecological issues, as well as the problems that can beset modern children.

For example **'A Hippo Doing Backstroke'** by **Thurley Fowler,** (Hodder & Stoughton) is the story of Greg, known as Hippo to his school-mates because of his size. Sent to live with his Gran, he is put on a diet and made to exercise,



until he gets fit and decides to stay with Gran and work on the farm rather than go back to the city and his father. This is a well written, and good, convincing story.

Hippo's **'Animal Inn'** series by **Val Taylor** is about a girl who helps her father in his veterinary practice, and the **'Green Watch'** series by **Anthony Masters** is about a group of young people battling, says the jacket blurb, "to save the natural world from ruthless exploitation." Both series are also extremely popular.

History

If you are keen on writing an historical story, given a major anniversary such as, for instance, Columbus' discovery of America, you can be sure that it will feature in newspapers and television programmes, and probably in the school syllabus. Children will have their appetite for the period whetted, and many publishers will feel they should feature a book based on the event on their list.

So keep your eyes open for possibilities and remember the lead-time involved. With at least a year needed for the publication process, and the necessity to sell co-editions to other countries, your manuscript should reach the publishers at least **18 months before the event.**

You do not need to set your story in the actual period. While it would be fun to write a story about, for instance, a cabin boy who sailed with Drake, it would be equally valid to write about a modern boy whose ancestor was a cabin boy. There might be the location of a sunken treasure galleon in the ancestor's journal, or the family might discover his trunk when they dig out the foundations of the cellar, either of which would trigger an adventure for your young hero.

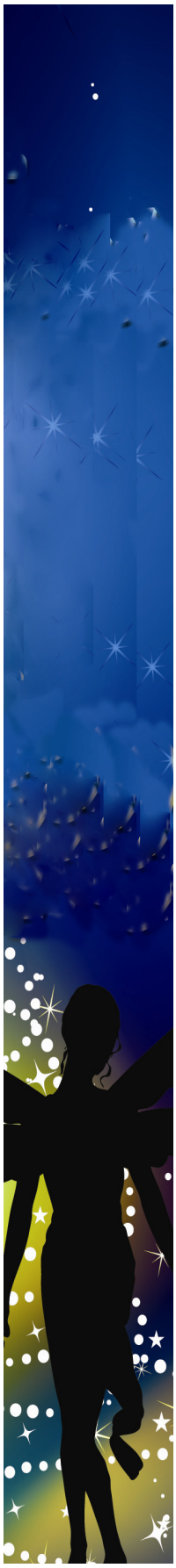
If you want to check on forthcoming anniversaries, the two best sources are **'Everyman's Dictionary of Dates'** (Dent) and **'The Independent Book of Anniversaries'** (Headline).

The most promising will be those involving multiples of 100 years, the start or finish of wars, the discovery of new countries or routes such as the North West passage, and major scientific discoveries or feats of engineering. Give your imagination free rein and see what you can come up with.

Whatever sort of story you choose to write for this age group, it should be what you would describe as 'a rattling good yarn'.

Unlike teenagers, who can be introspective, and adults who often read for relaxation at the end of a long working day, children in this age bracket read for other reasons. **They want stimulation and they want to learn, particularly about situations in which they might find themselves.**

Top Insider Tip…



Think about it this way: Children want the books they read to deliver the goods in the same fast-paced way as their favourite television programmes.

Keeping Up The Pace

Even in books for sub-teens, you don't have that much wordage to play with. At 35,000 words, with twenty chapters, you have 1700 to 1800 words per chapter, and in each chapter, if you are to keep up the pace, **something dramatic must happen.**

You may find it helpful to turn each incident or conversation into a visual scene, as though it were on television. 'See' each character as they move through the scene, and 'watch' what they do with their hands and faces. This is most important, as this movement is part of how you **show us** your characters relating to each other rather than **tell us** what they do.

For example, here are two versions of a scene where a young girl is telling her friend about the phone call she has just had, demanding a ransom for her kidnapped dog.

Version One:

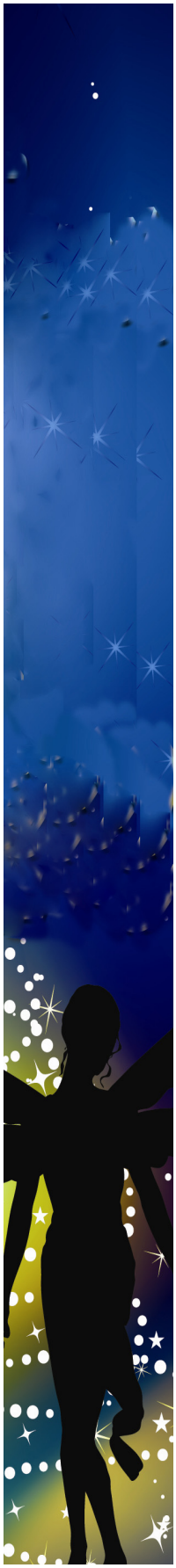
"He said they'd kill him if I didn't pay", said Trudy miserably. Her eyes were red from crying and she hadn't combed her hair.
"How much did they ask for?" enquired Jane, smiling sympathetically. "I've got some money in the Post Office. I could lend it to you," she offered.
"So have I," replied Trudy, blowing her nose. "But not enough. They want five hundred pounds!"

Version Two:

"He said they'd kill him if I didn't pay." Trudy wiped the tears from reddened eyes with the back of her hand.
Jane delved in her bag for a paper handkerchief.
"Here - use this. You'd better borrow my comb too, you look like you've been dragged through a hedge." She smiled sympathetically. "How much do they want? I'll lend you some if it would help. I've still got most of my Christmas money in the Post Office."
"So have I." Trudy blew her nose and dumped the handkerchief in the ashtray. "But not enough. They want five hundred pounds!"

The second version is much livelier than the first, where the two characters seem just to sit and look at each other. Notice also that in this version, the action is separate from the speeches.

As I mentioned in Lesson Five, it is physically impossible to talk and smile simultaneously, or talk as you blow your nose. If you analyse any piece of televised drama, you will see that **it is very rare for the actors to deliver a line at the same time as performing an action.** They certainly don't talk if the action is significant.



Actions and Emotions

The other thing that you should have noticed is that although Jane has offered her comb, Trudy did not use it. To use two actions in this situation would have **slowed down the pace** and turned a **dramatic scene** into one of **personal grooming.** Combing one's hair is usually a soothing activity, so unless you described Trudy as 'savagely dragging' the comb through her hair, you would run the risk of calming down a passage that is meant to be a dramatic climax.

This violent hair-combing would be an acceptable substitute for the nose-blowing and hankie-dumping sentence, but not an addition. Even though the verbs used both imply violent movement, a second piece of action would still delay the climax of the amount of ransom demanded.

Note the careful choice of words. She 'dumps' the handkerchief. This is much more powerful than 'placing' the handkerchief' or 'putting' the handkerchief, don't you agree? You should consider every word, rather than just putting down the first thing comes into your head.

Do not waste the impact of dramatic incidents by placing them in the middle of a chapter. Fast-paced stories require a 'page-turner' at the end of each chapter to keep the reader hooked, and ideally it should be an incident that can continue at the beginning of the next chapter to draw the reader in.

So with this example at the end of a chapter, **the next chapter would start with Jane echoing the impossible amount demanded:**

"Five Hundred Pounds!" Jane stared at Trudy, horrified. "But that's...that's impossible! How do they think we can get hold of five hundred pounds?"

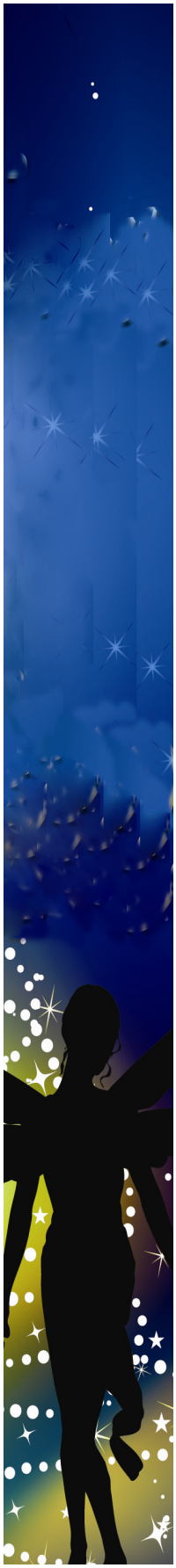
Then they settle down to discuss ways and means of raising the money.

Showing Relationships

There is another point in this last speech that you should have noticed. Jane says 'we' instead of 'you'. By this simple choice of word, Jane is showing that she is Trudy's best friend and considers herself **fully involved** with anything that happens to her. The alternative could only be the tedious telling method; a dull piece of prose that states the facts.

Using 'we' also creates a pair of characters that the readers will be happy to identify with. One has a friend who will stick by her when she is in trouble; the other is a true friend, with absolute loyalty. Whichever character the reader chooses to identify with, the thought that she is like either girl will give her a warm feeling and she will want to read on to see what happens to them.

This **loyalty between friends** is one of the things that **children assume should be part of life's natural fairness**. By the time they are teenagers, they begin to realise that life is not always fair, that even your best friend might let



you down, and that adults are not infallible and sometimes tell lies.

Pre-teenagers may be seeing some signs of this, but they are not prepared to accept that it is how things *should* be, and they do not want to read books where it happens.

Remember that the purpose of fiction (all fiction) is not to describe the world's evils, follies and woes - few people want to read this as there is plenty of this sort of thing on the evening news. No, **the purpose of most fiction is to reassure ourselves about the way the world *should* be.** We want happy endings. We want goodies to win and baddies to suffer. Above all we want entertainment.

Weaving the Strands of a Story

This incident of the two friends serves also to show how much thought you have to give to all the elements of your story and to how you are going to weave all the necessary strands together to produce the final design.

Your **characters,** your **plot**, and your **setting should be inseparable, woven tightly together by the action, the dialogue and the necessary passages of description**. This is the craft of writing.

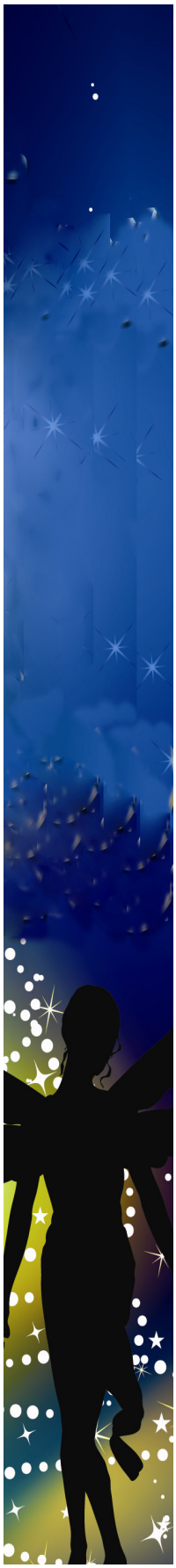
Every incident must have a purpose, and must be an inevitable part of the unfolding story. This is why you need to plan carefully before you start writing, otherwise you might be tempted to slot in an incident that has no real place in the story to get over one of the inevitable gaps that open up in an unplanned plot. Such incidents always appear contrived, no matter how hard you try to fit them in seamlessly.

Coincidences

One of the worst of such contrivances is the coincidence. They do occur in real life, but somehow they always seem contrived in fiction. So unless you are introducing a sequence of them as deliberate 'enemy action' ("Once is an accident, twice is coincidence, three times has to be enemy action") they are best avoided.

The 'enemy action' scenario is a useful one. Children are less inclined to believe in coincidence than adults, and in any case, resorting to coincidence is such a *weak* device, don't you feel? Seeing a sequence of sinister strangers lurking on the corner night after night, the average child soon decides they are up to no good. Adults, if they notice the strangers at all, will assume they are waiting for a lift, and say "Nonsense, darling, you're imagining things" to the child who expresses his misgivings.

In a story where the strangers are indeed up to mischief, this adult tendency to declare the involvement of coincidence can only add to the dilemma of a child who needs to tell someone else what is going on.



Sub-plots

This is all good **conflict** building material and helps to keep the dramatic pace going. It could also serve as a sub-plot to the main story, with the main character making repeated attempts to convince his parents, and his parents saying "There, there, dear, never mind," and smiling indulgently.

You could make it light-hearted or even humorous, to serve as light relief from the main story. The more dramatic the main events, the more necessary it is to slow the pace at intervals to allow the reader to recover a little before the tension builds again.

Although not the same situation, you can see a good example of this in **Terry Pratchett's 'Only You Can Save Mankind'** (Doubleday). The main story concerns Johnny, who is playing with his new computer game when the Space Aliens surrender and he then finds himself having to defend them from other players. The sub-plot revolves round the deteriorating situation between Johnny's parents and his forays into the kitchen to find food, because neither parent is feeding him.

You should only use such **sub-plots when writing for older children in this age band**. This is partly because the lower wordage limits for younger children just don't leave room, and partly because younger children find it difficult to cope with two threads at the same time.

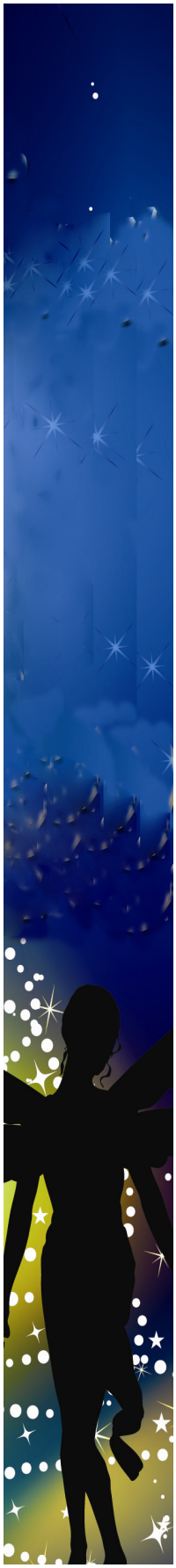
Sub-teens, the ten to twelve year olds, have no difficulties with the multiple devices that authors use in adult fiction.

For example, they can cope with:

- Changes of time, or flash-backs.
- Changes to the more complex verb forms that are used when telling of an action that has been completed in the past or will be completed in the future. For example, a character who is a keen runner could say, "I went for a six mile run yesterday", or "I was doing a six mile run twice a week before the marathon", or "I will have to do a six mile run twice a week by the end of next month if I am going to be fit enough for the marathon." These are complex tense structures that older children in this age group will understand, but not the younger. Even more complex is "I would have had to go for a run today if the Marathon hadn't been cancelled yesterday"!!

What these readers don't like, and what you should avoid, are multiple viewpoints. This is a common device in adult fiction, where the writer brings a complex story together by telling a little piece of each person's story in turn.

This device is common in books by Stephen King, for example. The first five chapters follow the individual paths of five characters who all meet up in the



sixth chapter. But this won't do for children. They like to see the whole thing from one person's point of view, and ideally that person should be the main character with whom they can identify.

Children's Books and Gender

For sub-teens, there is some separation into books for boys and books for girls, **but no publisher would dare designate a single book, let alone a list, as being for either gender.** Even the blurb-writers refer to the characters as 'two friends' rather than 'two girls' or 'two boys'. The only way the readers can tell is by the jacket picture and the subject matter.

Even if you subscribe to the strange notion that boys and girls are equally interested in all subjects, you would be wasting your time by writing about the 'wrong' gender for the subject.

Yes, there are girls who play football, and yes, there are boys who ride ponies, but proportionately few of either. Since it is almost entirely boys who like to read about football and almost entirely girls who like to read pony stories, you will find it **virtually impossible to interest a publisher in football stories for girls or pony stories for boys.**

As always there is at least one story that breaks the rule. And in this case, the film, **'Bend it like Beckham'** arguably crossed the gender line. The story is entertaining, both funny and sad, very cleverly written with the added element of two cultures clashing.

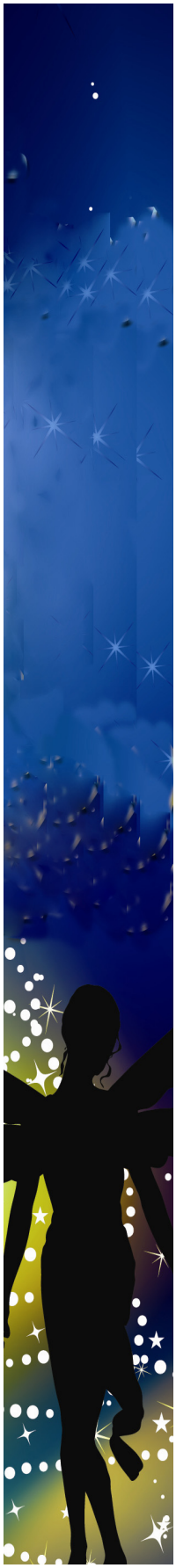
However much editorial staff may believe in gender equality, even they must be pragmatic. As far as the publishers are concerned, the main reason for publishing a book is to **make a profit on it,** not to spend money on a book that will just languish in the warehouse.

You have a fairly free hand with the other characters. For instance, there is no reason why the football teacher should not be female or the riding instructor male. But as always, keep political correctness in mind when you choose your villains and their sidekicks. You will invite rejection if your villains are racial stereotypes or suffer any form of physical disability.

Archetypal Baddie and the Wolf

You may even need to be careful about using that archetypal baddie of the animal kingdom, the wolf. There is a strong lobby of environmentalists working hard to rehabilitate the wolf's character, and re-establish breeding populations in wild places.

They point out that wolves normally only kill old or sick animals, and rarely touch farm animals; and that there are very few authenticated reports of wolves ever having eaten humans.



There have been no wild wolves in Britain for 400 years, but there are plenty of place-names that indicate where they were common, e.g. Howle Hill, Wolves Newton, Woolmer (Wolves Mere), Wolverton. And they remain in the subconscious as the beast that will hunt you down if you are foolish enough to go into the wild places at night.

They have featured in this role in Scandinavian mythology with the wolf Fenris, who will appear at the end of the world to devour the moon; and in many children's books: **Joan Aiken's 'The Wolves of Willoughby Chase'** (Cape) and **Stephen Elboz's 'The House of Rats'** (Oxford), in both of which the wolves prowl outside while the real danger to the child characters is from the humans within; the terrifying 'Growlers' in **Nigel Hinton's 'Beaver Towers'** and the brutal but smooth-talking Maugrim in **C.S. Lewis's 'The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe'**.

The wolf's bad reputation, and that of its recently popular relation, the werewolf, may have originated in the medieval bestiaries, where superstitious people used the wolf to portray the Devil. Rather like that wonderful biblical excuse "I found this baby in the bull-rushes", to say "Well, he was a wolf when I struck him, then he turned back into a man as he died" was the perfect medieval excuse when a person had taken the law into his own hands.

The best known case of this was the 'Beast of Gevaudan' in the Auvergne in France, which may have been the origin of Little Red Riding Hood. The earliest version of this story feature a werewolf instead of an ordinary wolf.

The most recent, in **Ann Jungman's** delightful series about Lucy and the Wolf (Young Lion) are at the other end of the spectrum, with the wolf as an urbane family man and Lucy's granny as a modern blonde with shapely legs.

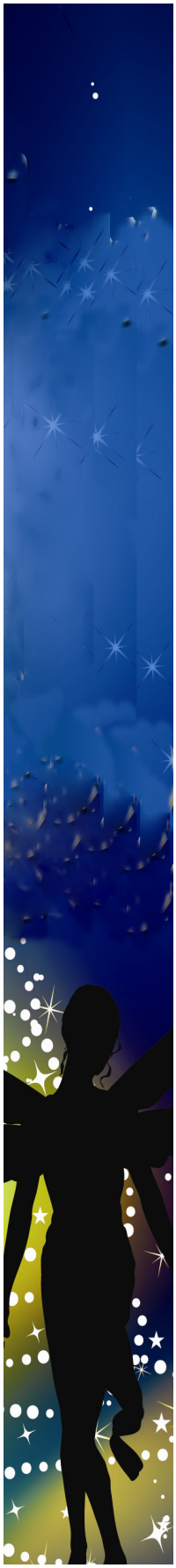
This series is very funny, and so is **Kathryn Cave's 'William and the Wolves'** (Puffin), where the wolves are imaginary. William's sister has an imaginary pet lamb, and when his mother tells him he has no imagination he is sufficiently annoyed to invent a pack of Siberian wolves that will eat the lamb.

The wolves go to school with him, where they lie in wait for late arrivals in the cloakroom, chew the Headmaster's shoe-laces in Assembly, howl when the music-mistress strikes up 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' on the Hall piano and advance menacingly across the stage when she carries on playing.

There is still plenty of scope for books featuring wolves and were-wolves, in both amusing and sinister form. The amusing version is probably better suited to books for younger readers and the sinister to books for older readers, where there is a growing market for horror stories.

Horror Stories

Two good authors to read to get an idea of what is popular in horror thrillers are **Robert Swindells** (especially his 'Stone Cold' and 'Inside the Worm') and



'Follow a Shadow'); and **Robert Westall.** He died in 1994, alas, so we won't have any more from him, but do read his **'The Wind Eye'** (Goodchild) where quarrelling children go to stay in their uncle's old house on the Northumbrian coast, where the shade of Saint Cuthbert draws them to an eerie island; **'The Old Man on a Horse'** (Hippo) where Toby's hippie parents take him to Stonehenge and then disappear. While sheltering with his sister in a barn Toby finds a statue of a man on a horse and is transported to the time of the Civil War; **'Ghost Abbey'** (Hippo Hauntings series) where Maggie and her family move into a run-down and possibly haunted old abbey and notice strange things going on in the rambling old building; and **'The Stones of Muncaster Cathedral'** steeple-jacks brought in to repair the cathedral tower.

Here are some other examples of this popular genre:
'Throwaways' by **Ian Strachan** (Methuen). Two children are abandoned by their parents and have to learn how to survive in the city on their own.

'The Screaming Field' by **Wendy Eyton** (Lions). One of the 'Under the Bedclothes' series of supernatural stories set in contemporary families. Not for sensitive children, some of these stories are truly horrifying!

'Naming the Dark' by **Annie Dalton** (Mammoth). A sinister town seems to have a hold over its inhabitants as dark forces mass.

'The Creepy Tale' by **Ritchie Perry** (Red Fox). Twins go to investigate a creepy house where murders took place years ago.

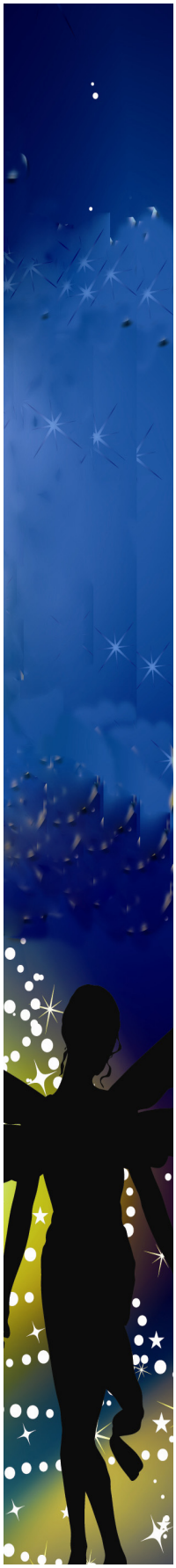
So there you have it: **a market place of voracious readers who will read almost any type of story, at varying lengths and varying complexity.**

They don't seem to be very keen on history at the moment, and are unlikely to be keen on 'soppy romantic stuff' at any time, but otherwise, anything goes. If you see yourself as a good old-fashioned story-teller, or just yearn to write a rattling good tale, this is the age band you should be writing for.

Publishers Contracts

The happy day has arrived. A publisher wants to publish your book, you've met your editor for the first time, and they've sent you a contract. The euphoria of the moment might tempt you to sign it and send it back straight away, but this would not be wise.

Remember that since the publisher drafted the contract it will be drawn up with the publisher's interests in mind, and these interests may not necessarily be the best for you. So read the contract very carefully, to be sure you understand every clause. If any clauses seem different from your editor's earlier promises, then telephone her and talk it through.



Don’t be Afraid to Negotiate

If there is anything you don't like in it, ask if that point is negotiable, and negotiate for better terms. There might be a slight delay while you send the contract back for alteration, but a delay is better than finding yourself stuck with terms that are not to your best advantage.

Ideally, you should seek a professional opinion. This might be a good point to find an agent to act for you, or you could ask for advice from the Society of Authors or The Writers Guild. For a small fee, either of these organisations will vet a contract for non-members. If you are a member, they do this for free.

They will not negotiate with the publisher on your behalf, but they have vast experience and they know which publishers are fair and which are stinkers. There is not much point in going to your usual solicitor for advice, unless they happen to specialise in publishers contracts.

The one thing you must not do is trust the publishers to look after you.

Every person at the firm may be charming and totally honourable, but we are discussing a document that defines the terms on which you will be paid on that book for potentially the whole of your lifetime and seventy years after your death.

The ‘nice people’ you are dealing with may be taken over by a firm of total stinkers, and you won't be able to do anything about it, or what the stinkers decide to do with your book, unless your contract says so.

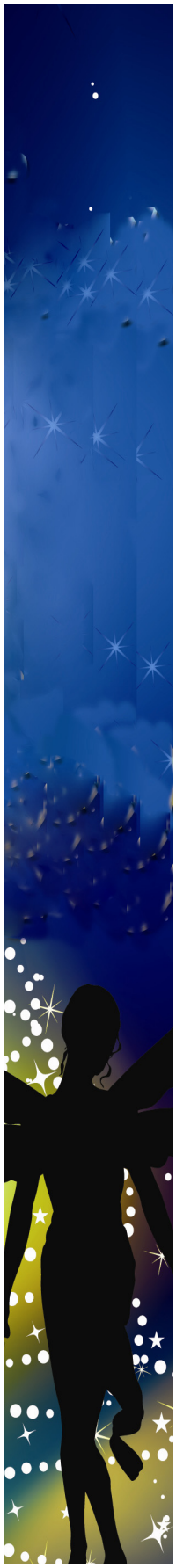
Here are some of the items that most contracts cover:

- **Delivery.** The date by which you *must* deliver the manuscript to the publishers. If they've already got the manuscript, it will say so, or have today's date. This clause is mostly used for books that are commissioned from experienced authors. Beware of contracts that say 'an acceptable manuscript', as this might allow them to refuse the manuscript without explanation and without paying you.

- **Length**. The required number of words.

- **Publication date.** This clause will usually say that they will publish the book within a certain number of months, often as many as 24. If it doesn't specify this, but says something vague like 'within a reasonable time', insist that a specific date is given.

- A definition of **what rights you are selling**. These could be foreign language as well as English language rights, the right to sell parts of your book to magazines, radio, television or film, paperback rights and electronic rights. Each of them will say what percentage you will receive of these sales. Be particularly wary of signing over rights to



your characters. The merchandising from a good character can easily out- perform the book royalties by a factor of one hundred or more.

- **How much you are to be paid and how frequently.** This will be a percentage figure, sometimes of the retail price and sometimes of the amount received by the publisher. Payment is usually made at six-monthly periods, but some publishers only pay once a year.

- **Royalties or outright sale.** The normal method of payment is by royalties, which means that they will pay you for every copy of the book they sell. They should offer, or let you negotiate, what they call 'a rising royalty'. This means that you will earn an extra percentage (usually 2.5%) on all copies sold after the first 10,000. For picture books, it is usual to split the total available royalty (usually 10% of the retail price) equally between the writer and the illustrator.

For your first book, you may be offered a lower royalty. This is reasonable but request that the lower royalty to be restricted to the first 10,000 copies only.

- **Advances.** Almost all publishers will give you an advance on your royalties. The contract will specify the amount of this advance, and whether or not it is to be refundable (it should not be) if insufficient copies are sold to pay for the advance. This is known as 'not earning out'. You will not receive any more money until they sell enough copies to cover the advance.

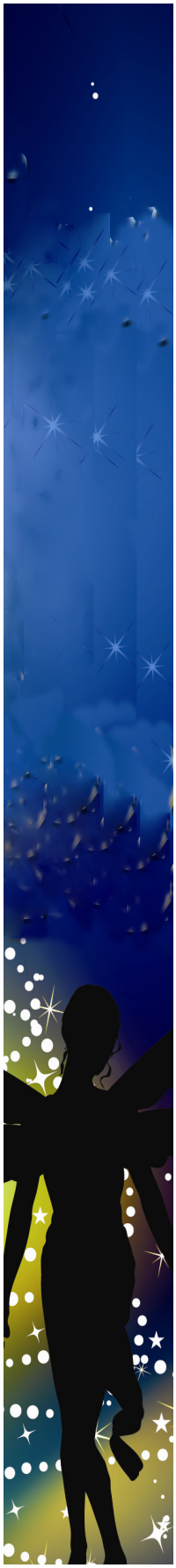
For your first book, when you have already delivered the manuscript, the advance will be split into two equal payments - half on signature of the contract and half on publication. For commissioned books the split is usually into three parts - a third on signature, a third on delivery, and a third on publication.

- **Details of the wording on the title page** which show your copyright and asserts your moral right to be identified as the author.

- **Details of the conditions of termination of the contract.** This usually states that if the book goes out of print and they do not reprint it within a specified period, the rights revert to you.

Beware of clauses which:

- Allow the publishers to assign the rights to someone else without your approval
- Give them the right to handle the merchandising of your characters.
- Give them the right to change your words without your approval
- Gives them the right of first refusal on your next one, two, or three books



- Denies you the right to write other books on the same subject. This usually only applies to non-fiction books, but even so is not reasonable.

Literary Agents

Opinions are divided on whether or not it is a good idea to have a literary agent. Many business-minded authors, especially those who are members of the Society of Authors or the Writer's Guild, see no point in paying between ten and fifteen per cent (plus VAT) of their earnings to someone for doing what they can do themselves.

Others, especially those who do not have business expertise, and who do not fancy getting involved in negotiations over terms, are quite happy for an agent to take a percentage for looking after them.

That said, it is not that easy to get an agent. Even at fifteen per cent of your earnings, most agents say that it is not worth their while taking on an author who will earn less than £20,000 a year. So they will want to be sure that you will be a consistent producer of saleable work. £20,000 a year gives them £3,000 in commission, and this is hardly a fortune to cover the expense of promoting your work and looking after you.

Note the two words in the above paragraph - **saleable work**. No agent will take you on unless you have a professional attitude and ensure that the work you produce is suitable for the market you are aiming at. **They are there to sell what you produce, not, as some authors naively assume, to find work for you.**

They are not interested in anything other than books, as even fifteen per cent of the amount magazines pay for short stories and articles is **not worth the time it would take to write an accompanying letter, let alone do any more.**

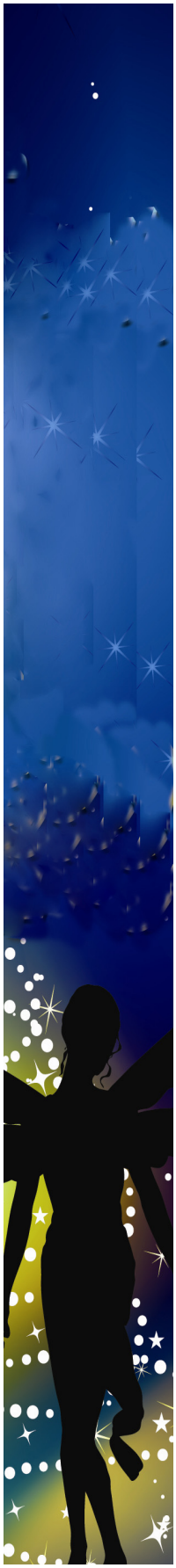
Track Record

Although there are agents who will consider the work of unpublished authors, most prefer to see some sort of a track record. This need not necessarily relate to children's books, but it does need to be more than a couple of short pieces in a local newspaper or a prize in a writer's circle competition.

A good point at which to ask an agent to take you on is when you have had a book accepted but not yet signed the contract.

You can find agents by enquiring at your local writer's circle or by consulting the Writer's and Artist's Yearbook. Choose an agent who is a member of the Publishers Association.

Send a preliminary letter with a synopsis of your book and a sample chapter. Do not send the full manuscript unless asked, and even then, enclose return postage.



Before you send the full manuscript, check to see whether they charge a reading fee. Most do not, and it is not a good idea to pay a reading fee for an opinion that experienced members of a good writer's circle will give you for free.

Merchandising Agents

Unlike literary agents, who deal only with the words you produce, merchandising agents specialise in handling the rights connected with the **characters** you create.

Look around you next time you go shopping. See how many items you can find bearing pictures of Beatrix Potter's characters, or Postman Pat, Paddington Bear, Fireman Sam, or countless other popular characters from children's books. They appear on ceramics, bed linen, tee-shirts, pencil cases, pots of yoghurt or packets of sweets; almost any surface that will take an impression - and every time your characters appear, you earn a fee as their creator.

If you are fortunate enough, or clever enough, to create characters that catch the fancy of the buying public, you could earn **vast amounts of money.** But merchandising is such a specialised area that you should not attempt to deal with it yourself, nor allow your publishers to do so. Select one of the merchandising agents listed in the Writer's and Artist's Yearbook and let them put their expertise at your disposal.

Common Mistakes

Lecturing Your Readers

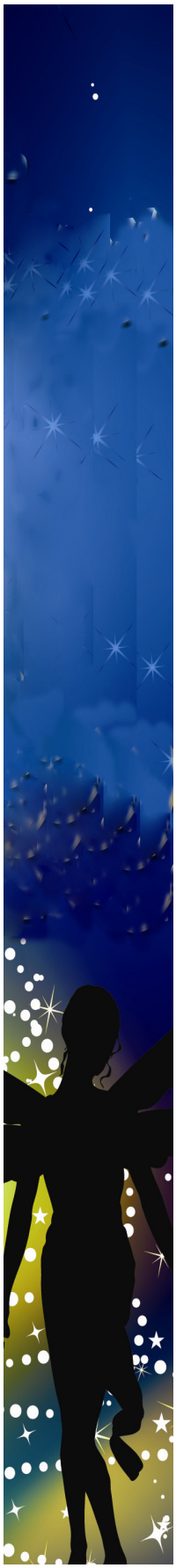
Some writers cannot resist the urge to switch into lecture mode when it is necessary to provide some background information that will allow the readers to understand an existing situation or some action that is to follow.

The problem is two-fold:

- Firstly it cannot help intruding into the narrative and often drags the reader out of the story and back into the real world.
- Secondly, the writer often gets carried away and delivers far more information than is necessary for the purposes of the story. This is sometimes called the 'soap box syndrome'.

Here is a typical example in a pony story where Carol, the heroine, has taken a job at the stables where client's horses are trained for the show-ring. All goes well until she has to ride a horse side-saddle and finds she can't stop it moving crab-wise, with its hind legs moving on a track to the right of its front legs. She goes back to the stable-yard to talk to her employer:

"I can't get him to go straight, Mrs Patterson. He's carrying his quarters in all the time. Is this when I should use the indirect rein of opposition? I've read



about it but I've never actually used it."

A horse carrying his quarters in when ridden side-saddle is a common sight in the show-ring. It is caused by the rider's weight having dropped back to the left, which then inadvertently gives the horse the aid to move his quarters to the right. The rider, if inexperienced, may need some more tuition to correct her fault, or the problem might be caused by the saddle fitting badly.

Some riders, unaware of the real cause of the problem, try to correct it by using the aid known as the 'indirect rein of opposition'. This consists of dropping the right hand back and down, in an action which effectively pushes the horse's quarters away from the hand. Its proper use is in advanced dressage movements such as the half-pass, and it rarely solves the problem described above.

Mrs Patterson frowned briefly at Carol. "Hmm. He's never done that with me. Let's see if you're sitting straight." .....'

That little lecture is all very interesting, but it belongs in an instructional book on riding side-saddle, not in a piece of fiction. There is far too much of it, anyway, since the whole object of this scene would be either to get Carol to meet the saddler or to get her to meet a dressage instructor.

The best way to handle it is to deliver the information as dialogue. This doesn't mean you let Mrs Patterson deliver a shortened version of the lecture, but that she tells Carol **what the readers need to know** in a few short sentences, interspersed with some action, like this:

"I can't get him to go straight, Mrs Patterson. He's carrying his quarters in all the time. Is this when I should use the indirect rein of opposition? I've read about it but I've never actually used it."

Mrs Patterson frowned. "Indirect rein of opposition? Lord, no, you only use that for dressage. If he's not going straight, we need to find out why, not add something complicated. Let me have a look at you." She walked round behind Carol.

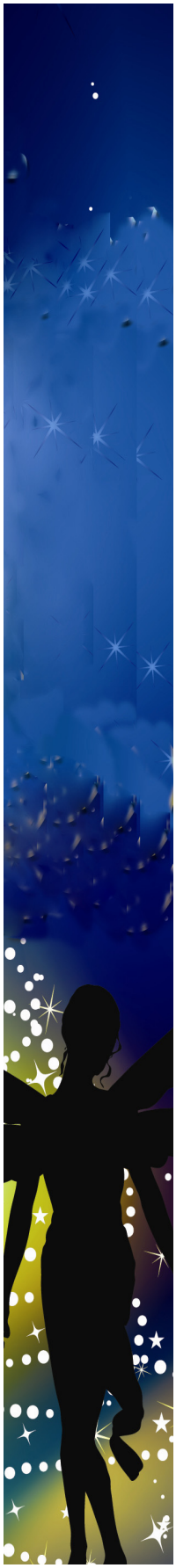
"Well, you're sitting straight enough, but the saddle's over to the left. That's what's causing it." She came on round to Sunshine's off-side and laid her hand on his shoulder. "Here we are! He's muscled up a lot since I had this saddle on him last season. We'll have to get Mr Wooley to come and take some of the stuffing out of the front here."

There! Wasn't that far more digestible?

Just as bad as the lecture is the situation **where characters tell each other things that the readers need to know, but which the characters must already be fully aware of** (and hence would not be discussing).

For example, here are two friends on their last day at school:

"Well, Patsy, we've been here for seven years, since we were eleven, and



we've been friends ever since the first day. And now we're going to university together and we'll be sharing a flat in Cambridge."

Ludicrous, isn't it? **What they are more likely to say is:**

"Gosh, it'll seem strange not coming here anymore after seven years."
Patsy grinned. "You'll say the same thing after two years at Cambridge. I'm ever so glad we managed to get into the same college."
"So am I. Oh, I forgot to tell you, the flat's all organised - Dad sent off the deposit yesterday."
"Great! When can we start taking our stuff up there?"

So, if you can't avoid 'telling' your readers what they need to know, do it in dialogue, broken up with some action, and keep it to the absolute minimum.

Pet Themes

Also avoid standing on your soap box and lecturing on your pet theme (or moral) via your characters. The publisher will spot this at twenty paces, and she will reject your manuscript out of hand.

Your morals are, by definition, out of date, old fashioned and fuddy-duddy when seen through the eyes of (say) a nine year old child. Don't try to ram your vision of a perfect world down the poor child's throat! If you have a tendency to say things like "The trouble with the kids of today is...", then pay particular attention to your writing, and ruthlessly expunge any hint of high-handed moralising.

Don't forget, to write for children you must like them. If you don't then you're wasting your time and everybody else's time.

If you enjoy reading stories to children and watching their faces go through a myriad of expressions, and if you love to hear them laugh or squeal with delight, then you maybe you could be the next J K Rowling.

Have fun and I look forward to giving you some more top tips, techniques and insider secrets next month on writing children's books.

Scott Thornton