How to Become a Millionaire Children's Author

LESSON FOUR

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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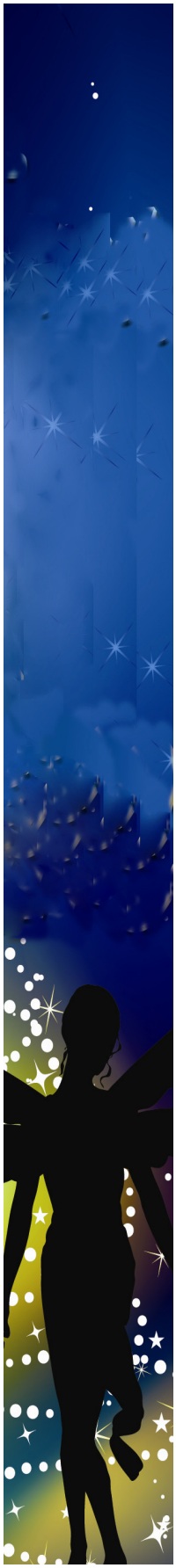


Welcome and a huge 'Thank You' for purchasing 'Lesson Four' of the twelve part course, 'How to Become a Millionaire Children's Author'.

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.

Developing Credible Characters

More rejections result from weak characterisation than from any other reason. So, if you want to be published, it is up to you to create and develop characters who are credible in themselves, and who react in a believable way to the situations in which you have put them.

Hot Insider Tip…

The key words are **credible** and **believable**.

If you are new to writing fiction, this may seem a difficult task, but like all the other aspects of writing for children, it is only a matter of learning techniques and keeping your eyes and ears open as you go about your daily life.

Every published writer carries a notebook or some index cards with them. If you don't already do it, get into the habit of doing this every time you leave the house.

Whenever you see a person whose **attitude, actions, or dress,** strike you as interesting, make a note of these features as soon as you can tactfully do so. And don't forget **dialogue**. Of course, you have to be diplomatic and make sure you only write down snippets of conversation, without people knowing and definitely without causing offence.

Here's an example of two dialogue lines I wrote down only yesterday. The people concerned were two females, one aged eighteen years and the other nearly fifty.

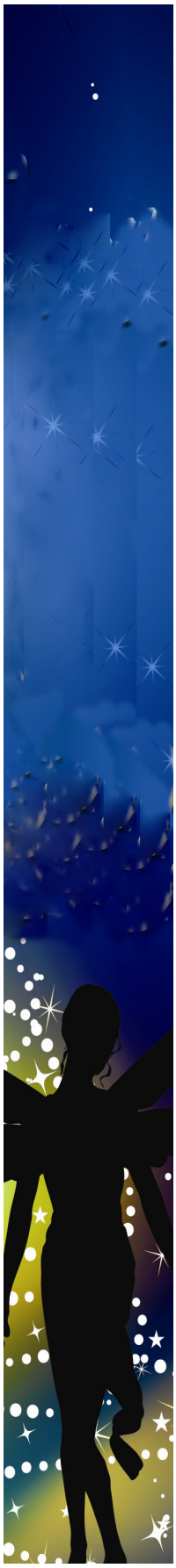
This is what they said:

- "Are you getting the hang of it?"
- "Yes, I'm learning how to do it."

Can you see how interesting those two lines of speech are? Both people are saying the same thing, but constructing the sentence in their own special way.

So, let's here's a quick summary list of what you need to note down so you can create credible and believable characters:

- Attitudes
- Actions
- Habits



- Dress
- Speech patterns

These notes will build up in time to a **collection of characters** which you can use to populate your stories.

Here is a sample of some typical notes:

'Chinless lady, wearing a black sweater with yellow poodles embroidered on the front of it.'

'Prissy elderly man, half-moon glasses, string vest visible under thin shirt, prefacing all speeches with "*I pride myself*" or "*I must admit*".'

'Brown-haired girl with a habit of suddenly tilting her head to one side. Probably thinks it's winsome. Actually looks like a demented blackbird listening for worms.'

'Middle-aged lady at slide show, meant to be handing round a plate of biscuits, stopping to gossip with a friend. The tray tilts alarmingly as she leans forwards.'

'15 year old boy, battered leather jacket, old jeans, grubby trainers, gazing into motor cycle showroom with an expression like a 5 year old looking at a toy shop before Christmas.'

'Group of schoolgirls, looking strangely bulky round the waist. They've rolled their skirts over at the top to shorten them.'

None of these are complete personalities, but each gives enough description to indicate the character of the person you saw. There is a mixed bag of adults and children here, for you will need both in your cast of available characters.

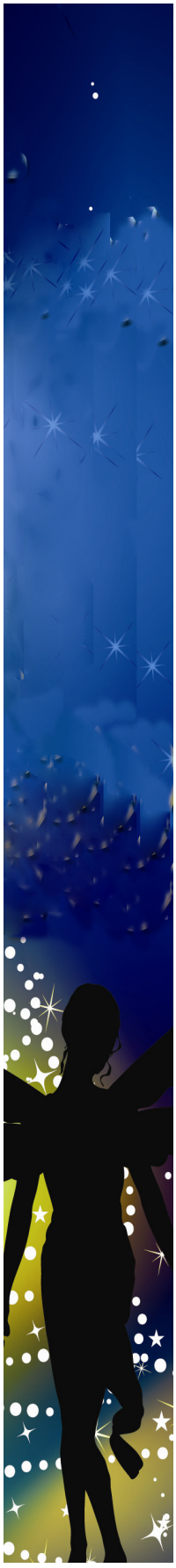
The lady with the biscuits could be an embarrassing aunt, and the prissy man could be an obstructive bureaucrat encountered by one of your younger characters.

Once you get into the habit of noticing interesting people like these, you will find them all around you and will never be stuck for a subsidiary character. The trick is to collect enough snippets so that you can amalgamate them and make a more rounded and credible character.

If you were writing books for the adult reader, all of your characters (apart from the most minor ones) would be multi-dimensional. However, for children, it’s different.

This is the format for characterisation:

- Very young children need simple, one-dimensional players. The term



for this is 'cardboard cut-out' characters.

- The older the children you are writing for, the more multi-dimensional your characters need to be.

Combining Characteristics

As a writer, you can mix and match the traits of people you have in your notes to create totally new and interesting characters for your stories.

For example, you have written in your notebook:
'Elderly man in cafe, waiting to be served was scraping at a dried gravy stain on the table top with his fingernail'.

Combine him with the prissy, elderly man, and you can describe him thinking that hygiene standards are not what they used to be. He might then decide to report the cafe to the Public Health inspectors.

With these two little observed incidents, you have created a man who is not only obstructive, but also the sort of mean-spirited person who enjoys getting other people into trouble. He would take great delight in hounding your young hero (who serves in the cafe?) over what he sees as the deliberate infringement of some petty statute.

It is far better to make a **composite character** from observations of several people than it is to try to use someone you know well. There is a risk that the person you use will recognise themselves and take offence. Your intimate knowledge of the real person might even produce a character who would not behave as your fictional character should.

Always create each character, especially the villains, to fit the requirements of your story.

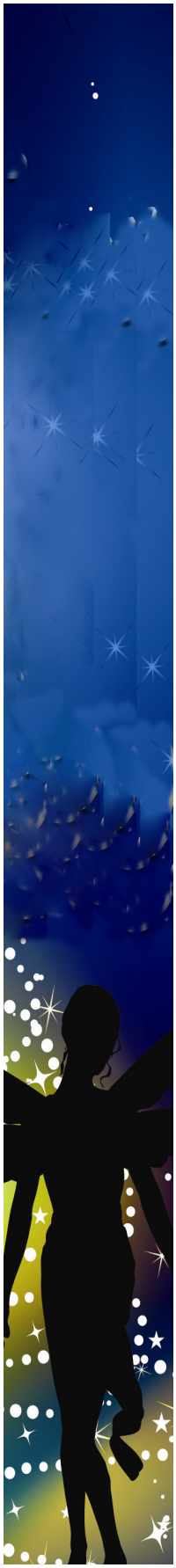
It is a good idea to have a standard check list of characteristics that you fill in for each character. You can type out the headings on a single sheet of A4, and then photocopy fifty or so 'blanks' for future use. As you draft your first outline, start a new sheet for every person.

At this stage, you don't have to give them a name, unless one pops into your head. Just put 'hero', 'hero's mother', 'hero's friend' or 'villain' and so on. Then you can go back to them and work out the details of all of them.

Here are two lists, filled in for Susan and Mary.

Heroine

Name:	Susan Horner.
Address:	Terraced house, Middleham, Kent. Industrial town near Medway.
Age:	17.



Place of birth:	As above.
Father's job:	Painter and decorator.
Mother's job:	Part-time secretary.
Position in family:	3rd child. Married sister, brother on oil-rig.
Description:	5'5", slim, brown hair, brown eyes, snub nose, quite pretty.
Accent:	Average lower middle class.
Likes:	Classical music, ballet, ice skating.
Dislikes:	Cooking, team sports, motor-bikes.
Problem:	Can't afford to continue music training without scholarship. Desperately wants to be professional musician.

Competing Character

Name:	Mary Stanswyke.
Address:	Middleham - large house on outskirts of town.
Age:	17.
Place of birth:	Birmingham.
Father's job:	Owns factory making plastic mouldings.
Mother's job:	Consultant interior designer.
Position in family:	Only child.
Physical description:	5'6", voluptuous, auburn hair, hazel eyes, too much make-up.
Accent:	Reflects parent's social climbing ambitions - can slip at times.
Likes:	Boys, discos, dancing, music.
Dislikes:	Anyone who gets in her way.
Problem:	Wants to get away from home, sees music college as good excuse.

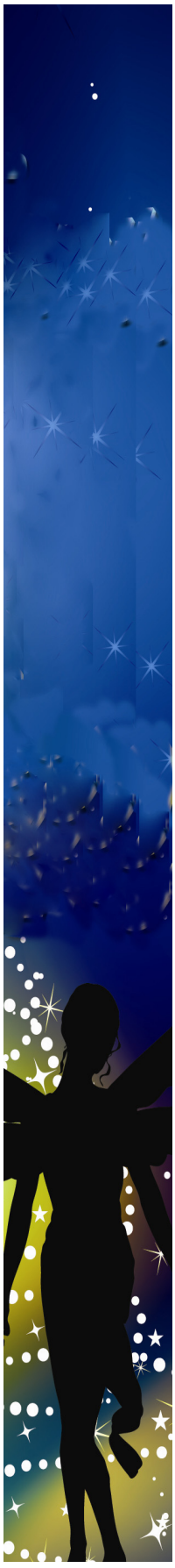
Obviously there are many more headings you could create, such as links to other characters, intellectual ability, emotional tendencies (angry, sad, violent, calm) and so on. Over time, you will compose your own list.

Even with such brief details, the personality of these two characters is developing quite strongly.

Susan is coming across as a quiet girl, with little thought for anything except music. Mary is much brasher and possibly unscrupulous when it comes to achieving her aims.

Note also the use of **contrast**, both between the girls, but more subtly between their real characters and their **stereotyped** characters.

Hot Insider Tip…
Always guard against creating stereotyped characters - they will automatically damn your story to the rejection pile!



Here's a list of stereotypes:

- A bar lady who is busty, blonde and dim.
- A taxi driver with a cockney accent who says, 'Where to, mate?' and chews gum.
- A secretary with limited knowledge of her job, who relies on her sex appeal to remain employed.

Here are examples of how you can make these people into non-stereotype characters:

- A petite bar lady who in response to customers' problems advises them by quoting lines from the plays of Shakespeare.
- A taxi driver who wears a suit and uses words and phrases you would expect to hear from someone in the legal profession.
- A secretary with unusual dress sense, who is so good at her job her boss doesn't complain.

The helpful rule to avoid stereotyping is…

Guard against the obvious.

- It's too obvious and simplistic to make the lower class girl interested in boys, discos, make-up and getting away from home.
- It's too obvious and simplistic to make the middle class girl quiet, studious and keen on classical music and ballet.

But swap their characters around, and interest is immediately created. Always try to avoid stereotyping unless you are using it for deliberate effect.

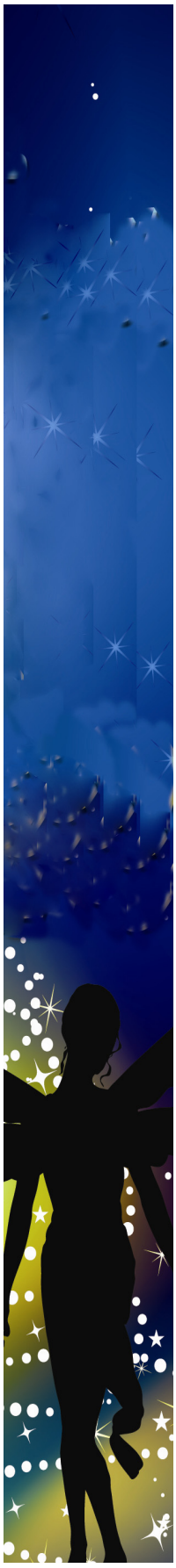
Role Reversal

The TV show, **'Absolutely Fabulous'** uses 'role reversal' to great effect.

Written by **Jennifer Saunders**, she also plays the lead role of the kooky mother with the attitude of a rebellious teenager. Her best friend, Patsy, played by Joanna Lumley, is just as bad. Together these two grown women, smoke, booze, take drugs and are completely irresponsible.

The daughter, 'Saffy' played by Julia Sawalha, whilst being a teenager, has the qualities of a very (over the top) sensible adult, who unsuccessfully deals with her mother's and Patsy's tantrums.

If you're ever stuck with developing a character, it's worth playing and experimenting with role reversal ideas. You don't have to take it to the extreme, but even one or two role reversal personality traits can lift a character from stereotypical to extraordinary or interesting.



Unfolding the Character

Although you can lay out the bones of each personality **for yourself** in a tabular way, you can't do it for the readers like this. They don't need to know all the details you write down for each character - just enough to make them seem like real people.

However, *you* have to be aware of every facet of your character's personalities, because if *you* don't know it all, *you* won't believe in the characters enough to present them as a rounded, credible people.

Since you can't go into a full physical description and personality evaluation of each character as they appear (this would be most tedious), you need to work out **what** the readers need to know, and **when** they need to know it. Then you can introduce other information during the story without making it obvious.

While you can leave some of the biographical information until later, do remember that your readers will be creating a **mental picture** of each character soon after they encounter them, so you shouldn't leave it until half way through the story to mention that your heroine has blue eyes and long blonde hair. If your reader has imagined her with brown eyes and a boyish hair cut, there will be a **readjustment jolt** which may be insurmountable.

Show, Don't Tell

The correct method of describing characters is best summed up by the phrase, "Show, don't Tell."

Memorise this phrase!

Example of telling readers:

Susan was a slim seventeen year old with short brown hair.

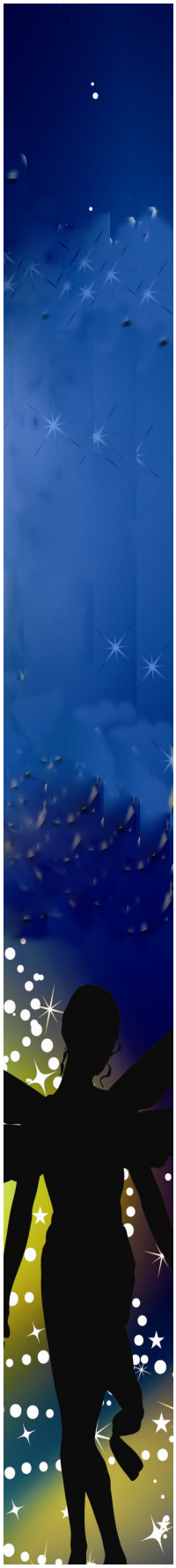
Example of showing readers:

Remembering the concert, Susan thought about the solo violinist's beautiful black dress. It was silk, shot through with a metallic thread that shimmered in the lights as she moved with the music. "It looked wonderful with her long blonde hair, but it wouldn't do anything for me. Maybe blue would make me look less mousy?" she wondered.

Do you see that in one paragraph we have made the words work hard for us? It tells of Susan's aspirations, hopes and dreams and sneaks in some physical description.

Another example of telling readers:

Mary was a voluptuous red-head, but she wore too much make-up for a seventeen-year old.



Another example of showing readers:

Mary added another layer of lipstick and powder, preening in front of the mirror and thinking "I knew this shade would go well with my hair. I hope Mum doesn't realise I pinched her 'Coppernob' rinse. Perhaps I should take another tuck in the waist here, just to nip me in a bit more."

There is no need to mention that either of them is seventeen, as this is obvious from the fact that they are senior sixth-formers about to go on to college.

"Show, don't tell" also applies to **personality traits**. We've already done it with the bureaucrat, by ***showing* him having a mean thought** rather than just *saying* "Mr Sanders was a mean man who enjoyed getting other people into trouble."

Here are some examples from published books.

From **'The Fright'** by **Jean Ure** (Orchard):

"Catherine ... went all red, and felt her heart begin to thump and her hands grow wet and sticky at the thought of going up to someone and starting a conversation. It would be easier, perhaps, with someone who was new, someone who didn't know how dim and stupid and tongue-tied she was."

There is a world of difference between the above description, and:

"Catherine was a shy, tongue-tied girl who found it difficult to talk to new people."

From **'A Proper Little Nooryeff'** by **Jean Ure** (Corgi Freeway):

"The big blue soup-plate eyes of Coral Flashlight protruded like globules: she tittered, into her hand. Jamie felt his cheeks turning brick colour. Savagely, he hacked at Doug's ankle beneath the desk. Doug only leered; and with maddening affability stuck his fingers in Jamie's face. There were times when having Doug for a best friend could be a real pain. Goaded, Jamie gave him a sharp shove in the ribs and mouthed two words, very succinctly."

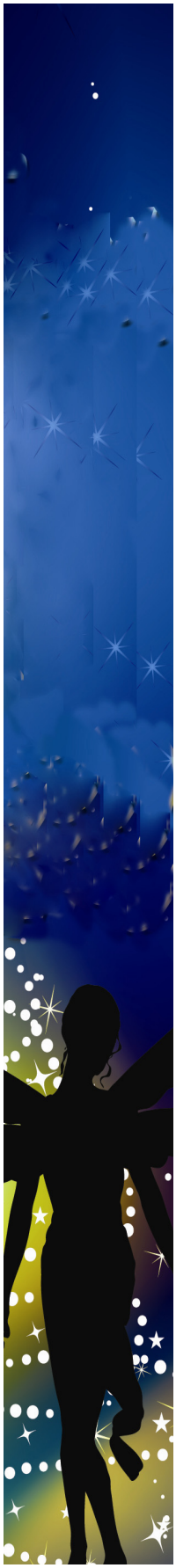
From **'Lucy and the Big Bad Wolf '** by **Ann Jungman** (Young Lion):

"Lucy drove [her bumper-car] around rather timidly, trying not to get bumped into. 'That's not the way to do it,' said the wolf, and he grabbed the steering wheel and drove as hard as he could into as many people as he could, whooping and shouting as he did so."

The above is much, much better than:

"Lucy was a timid girl, but the wolf was a brash sort of fellow."

From **'Who, Sir? Me, Sir?'** by **K M Peyton** (Puffin):



"He drove fast and cheerfully. It was the first time Hoomey had ever seen him look happy. Nails spun the Mini through the traffic, heading out of town, flicking up and down through the gears as if he did it every day."

Four Vital Elements

Some of these examples use **action sequences** to show the character's personality. Action scenes are one of the four vital elements of a satisfying characterisation.

The four elements are:

- Physical description. (Height, hair colour, age, etc.)
- Action. (What the character *does*.)
- Thoughts. (What the character *thinks*.)
- Dialogue. (What the character *says*.)

With the exception of thoughts, which you can only know about if people tell you them, these elements are the writer's reflection of the way you assess everyone you meet.

Apart from basic physiology, such as height, much of any person's physical appearance is **dictated by their personality.**

Examples:

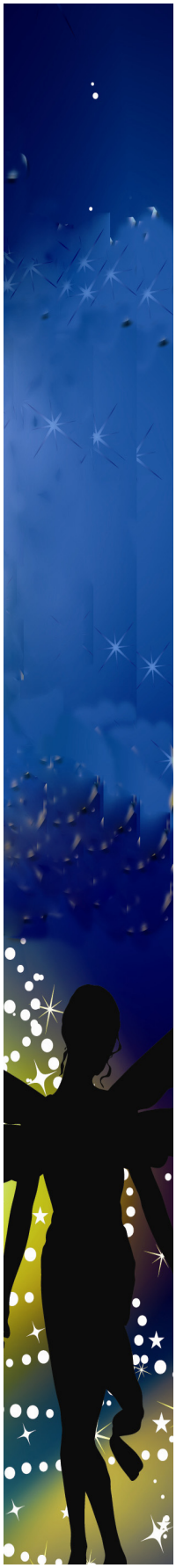
- Constant happiness or constant bad temper **show clearly on the face** and in **the set of the shoulders**.
- Anxiety about social inadequacy shows through **nervous mannerisms.**
- State of mind shows in **posture and movement.**
- The concept of the actual or desired self-image is demonstrated by **dress and grooming.**

The **words** people use when they speak and the **manner** in which they deliver them, tell us how each person's thought processes work, or how they want us to think they work.

They also tell us about:

- Social positioning.
- Standard of education.
- Interests.
- Beliefs.

The way people act as they go about their lives is the final part of the jigsaw, although in many people it is the first thing we notice about them.



The verb that you choose to describe your first sighting of someone says a tremendous amount about their personality and state of mind.

Look in your thesaurus at 'walk', and see the alternative verbs it offers you - tramp, stride, waddle, shuffle, limp, swagger, strut, march, skip, patter, stagger, trudge, tip-toe, wander.

Each of these verbs, let alone the many others listed, suggests a different person or a different mood.

Examples:

- 'Stride' or 'march' immediately suggest someone who is in a hurry and possibly a bad temper.
- 'Strut' or 'swagger' suggest someone who tends to be pleased with themselves most of the time or who is covering up an inadequacy.
- 'Limp' or 'stagger' could be used for someone who is injured, but like 'shuffle' or 'trudge' could also be someone who is very tired and dispirited.

Choose your verbs with care and you will be able to get your characters' personalities across to your readers without having to labour the point.

Hot Insider Tip…

Avoid the obvious verb like 'walk' or 'looked'. "Jim walked into the room," is a waste of a sentence because it conveys little more than the (boring) transportation of a person from one place to another. "Jim strutted into the room," says far more (if appropriate to the story-line, of course!).

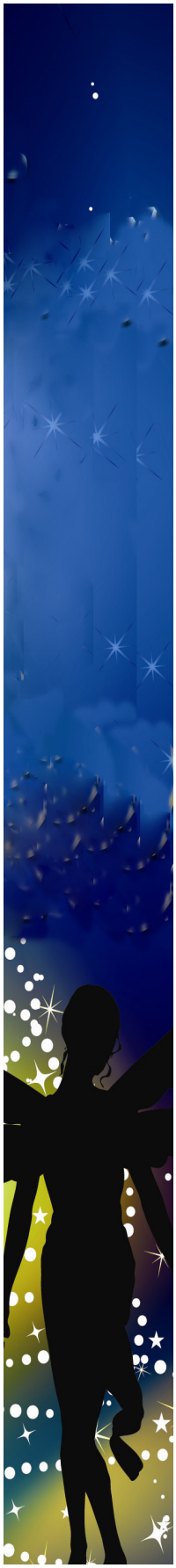
Similarly, 'Mary looked at her teacher,' is a waste, because it conveys little. 'Mary glared fiercely at Mr Jeffries,' says far more.

This applies not just when you introduce each character, but at regular intervals throughout your story. It reinforces the reader's first impression of the character, and serves to keep his interest engaged.

Tags

Another useful way to reinforce your character's traits is a device known as a 'tag'. Tags are the **gestures and mannerisms** that mark your fictional characters as individuals.

They can be forms of speech as well as mannerisms. For example, the bureaucrat's "I pride myself...", or Mr Stanislaw might say "The wrist, the wrist..." when he is teaching the violin. A good mannerism tag for Mary would be to pull out a lipstick and apply another layer of it, or Susan might tuck a



strand of hair behind her ear when she is concentrating.

There are few writers better than **Charles Dickens** when it comes to the use of mannerisms of speech and action to 'point' a person's character. You would be well rewarded by reading several of Dickens' novels. You will also be surprised and delighted at how readable they are. He was truly one of the all time great masters of fiction.

Here is a section from **Great Expectations** in which **Dickens** makes **masterful use of a hat to point Joe's slow-witted character**:

'I am glad to see you Joe, give me your hat.'

But Joe, taking it carefully with both hands, like a bird's nest with eggs in it, wouldn't hear of parting with that piece of property, and persisted in standing over it in a most uncomfortable way. All this time, still with both hands taking great care of the birds nest, Joe was rolling his eyes round and round the room, and round and round the flowered pattern of my dressing-gown.

Having found a good 'prop', Dickens does not hesitate to use it repeatedly. Here he is a few pages later, using it **to indicate Joe's nervousness:**

Here, Joe's hat tumbled off the mantle piece, and he started out of his chair and picked it up, and fitted it to the exact same spot. As if it were an absolute point of good breeding that it should tumble off again soon.

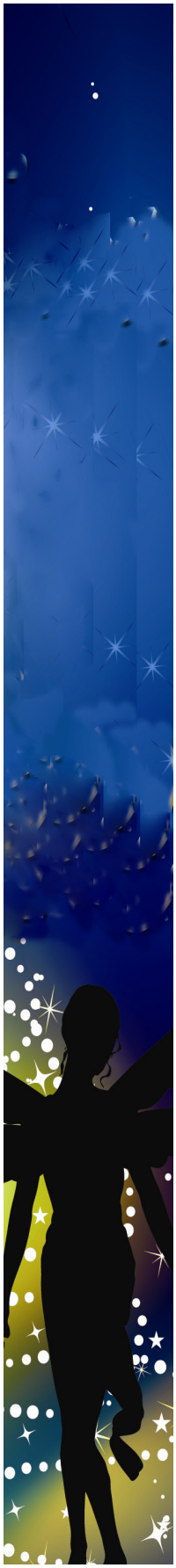
Of course, the style of Dickens' writing is hopelessly wordy for the modern market, but the point here is to **learn from a master** of character description. **Copy his methods, but not his choice of language.**

Back to the more contemporary Susan and Mary:

Part of the interest with Susan and Mary is that although they seem to share the same ambition, their personalities are complete **contrasts**. Susan is modest and dreamy, Mary is brash and pushy; Susan's appearance is self-effacing, Mary takes steps to be noticed; Susan's thoughts are turned inwards, focusing on the mental pleasures of her music, while Mary is an extrovert for whom music is a vehicle to achieve fame.

If you can create characters with **contrasting personalities** like these, you will add **colour** to your writing. Opposites make for misunderstandings (**conflicts**), which are always interesting.

It is normal for people to assume that other people feel as they do, and will react to a given situation as they do themselves. When they meet someone who feels and reacts in a completely different way, they don't understand what is happening. Some will merely be puzzled, but others will become aggrieved at what they see as strange and illogical behaviour.



Teenagers are particularly inclined to react this way, which causes much of the conflict between them and adults.

Using Displacement Activity

Teenagers are also very prone to what animal behaviourists call 'displacement activity'. It is not an exclusively teenage trait, but can be seen in people of all ages, usually when they are embarrassed. This can occur when someone has done something that is inappropriate for the situation.

You will also find that most people are embarrassed when describing situations in which they reacted emotionally. They will play down their report of what they did and felt, and because they are not being strictly truthful they will perform displacement behaviour.

Here are some examples of devices for *showing* your character's emotions:

- A boy scratches his ear or delves in his school-bag.
- A girl twiddles a strand of hair or gets out a mirror and checks her make-up.
- A mother grabs a sponge and wipes the work-top.

Joe was engaging in typical displacement activity with his hat.

Another situation where this displacement activity takes place is **when someone doesn't want to admit exactly what they are doing**.

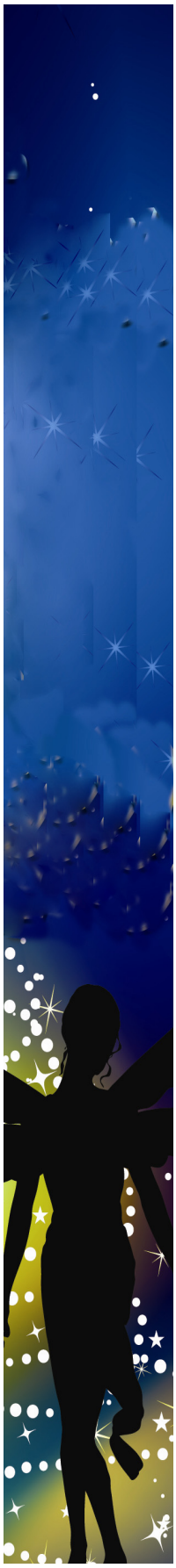
A typical example would be a teenage girl who is waiting for a phone call from the boy she fancies. She won't admit that she is waiting for the call, but she can find plenty of weak excuses to hang around by the phone - and of course, the more her parents ask what she is doing in the hall, the more embarrassed she will get and the more 'busy' work she will find for her hands.

There are a number of recently developed theories which might help you in developing your characters. They are NLP, Body Language and Transactional Analysis. A study of all three will pay great dividends in your daily interaction with those around you. It will also help you to *show* your characters to the reader in an interesting and subtle way.

The first of these is Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), which I introduced to you in the last lesson.

Using NLP

The theory goes that each person is thought to favour one area of perception - visual, audio, feeling, or cerebral thought. You can often tell which is favoured by the person's use of words and choice of life style. Life style, in this context, means not only their house (or in a child's case, their own room) but the work they choose to do.



'Visual' People

They use visually related words and phrases when they speak - they say "I see what you mean"; "Show me" and "That looks great." They tend to like things to be neat and tidy, and favour hobbies like photography, stamp collecting or art. Visual children will want to be artists, designers, or film-makers when they leave school.

'Audio' People

They use hearing related words - they say "I hear what you say"; "Tell me more"; and "It's clicking into place." They tend to be more concerned with comfort than fashion, and they are very fond of music. All children like pop music, but the audio child will also like melodic music and want to be a musician or a singer, or some other sound related job, like a radio presenter.

'Feeler' People

They say "That feels right"; "Hold on a minute" and "Let's keep in touch." They like to make things with their hands and they like the feel of their body as it moves, so they want to be athletes or dancers, carpenters or cooks.

'Cerebral' People

They say "What do you think?"; "In my opinion" and use "logically" and "precisely" a lot. They tend to be cautious, because they like to think everything through before they commit themselves. They like occupations that involve collecting and using data, so will want to work with computers, be researchers, or, if they like disseminating data as well as collecting it, teachers.

NLP is a study that has been developed to help in counselling. Many sales people use it too, for the theory goes that it is easier to gain rapport with people if you adapt your speech patterns and choice of words to their preferred sense.

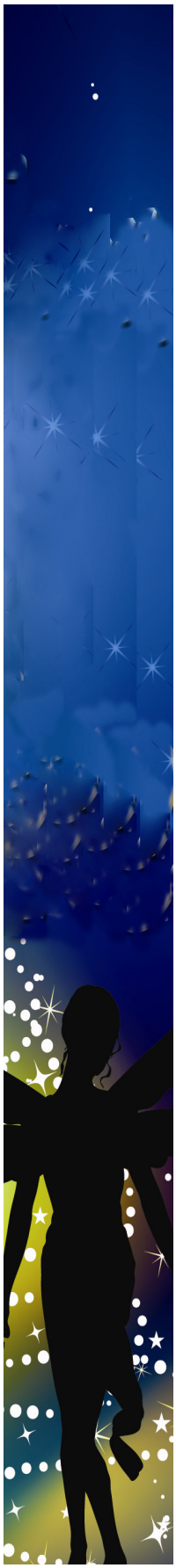
Obviously there is a lot more involved than the bare outline above. By now you will be trying to work out which you are, which your various friends and family are, whether it is a viable theory, but above all, what it has to do with writing for children.

Whether it holds true as a theory, it does offer a writer a good way of **differentiating** between characters. If a person favours one particular sense, they are bound to react differently to someone who favours another.

The NLP theory goes on to say that **when you offer information to people, they convert it to their *preferred* form before they process it**.

This is how people convert information:

- **Visualisers** convert it into **pictures**.
- **Audios** convert it into **sounds**.



- **Feelers** convert it into **feelings**.
- **Cerebrals** convert it into **concepts**.
- **Visualisers and cerebrals** prefer to **read** information.
- **Audios and feelers** prefer to **hear** information.

So here you have scope for conflict between characters, with a visualiser trying to push a letter at an audio, saying "Look at that" and the audio pushing it back and saying, "No, tell me what it says."

Or in a romantic story for teenage girls, she can't understand why he doesn't want to dance and cuddle, and he can't understand why she doesn't want to go to a lecture and discuss his latest theory.

Body Language

The next behavioural theory you should know about is that of body language.

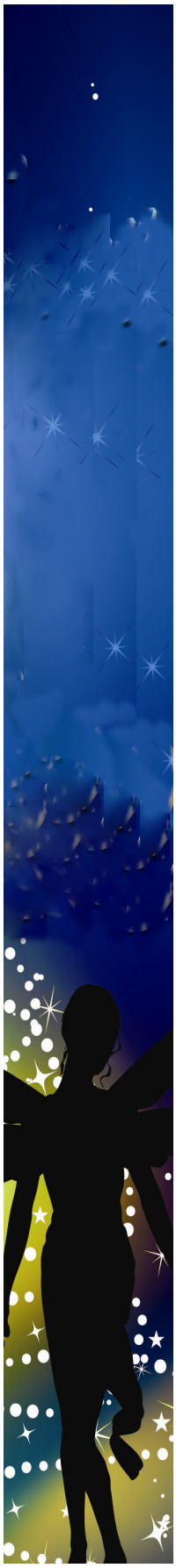
When you describe your characters interacting with each other, or reacting to news, you should be aware of how they would behave physically. This is another way of *showing* us their personality, without stating it directly.

Here are some guidelines (in the simplest form):

- People who are happy and secure will be 'open' in their posture.
- People who are insecure, or who feel under threat will be 'closed' with mouth pursed, and arms folded or held across their body. Others will put a portable barrier between themselves and you, such as a handbag which they will hold with both hands.
- People in offices who feel insecure will often barricade themselves in behind their desk, with obstacles on the floor and every inch of the desk covered with their belongings and their paper (although this could also be just plain untidiness!).
- Secure people will lean towards you during a conversation.
- Insecure people will lean back, and people who really dislike you will 'close up' and turn away from you, sitting at an angle with the leg nearest to you crossed over the other. They will often tuck their chin in and down, in hostility, and their eyes will narrow when they look at you.

There are many gestures that mean "I'm lying." Police officers are trained to detect these! Most involve covering the mouth with one hand (often disguised as a cough) but they also touch their nose, rub an eye or an ear, scratch their neck or pull at their collar.

As with NLP, there is a lot more about body language if you care to study it. If you can employ body language in your stories it will add reality to the way



your characters behave. If nothing else, it is a good foundation on which to base your own observations of the way people behave.

Transactional Analysis

The last of the new psychological theories that might be useful to you is called Transactional Analysis. It is useful as an insight into **motivation**, because it says that everybody lives their life according to a script that develops as they go through life.

All incidents and challenges are adapted mentally into **transactions** that fit their chosen script, and **each person seeks out and pursues goals which reinforce their chosen role in the drama.**

Games People Play

This theory was popularised some time ago in a book called **'Games People Play'** by **Dr Eric Berne** (Corgi) in which some frequently encountered scenarios were described.

One particularly interesting 'game' is called 'Sleeping Beauty'. The player of this game is a female who grew up with parents who continually told her she was pretty and deserving of love, and eventually she concludes that since she is clearly a **Beautiful Princess**, somewhere there must exist a **Handsome Prince** who will 'awaken her with a kiss' and take her off to live happily ever after.

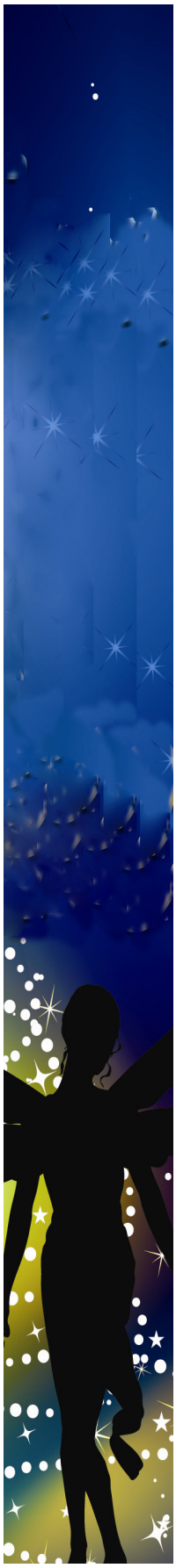
She makes it her life's work to find the Handsome Prince, and she critically examines every male she meets, with this in mind. If she should be lucky enough to meet one who has cast himself in the role of Handsome Prince, all will be well and they will indeed live happily ever after.

Alas, far fewer boys play Handsome Prince than girls play Sleeping Beauty, so her **chances of success are limited.** In adult life, she often goes through a series of divorces and re-marriages, as she finds each man is not the Handsome Prince she is seeking, and she ditches him and searches for the true Handsome Prince she knows must be out there somewhere.

Mary Stanswyke could be playing this game, and this would explain why she is so keen to get away from home. She cannot devote all her energies to finding her Handsome Prince while she is restricted by her parents' watchful eyes and the controls they impose on her behaviour.

Reasons Behind Actions

There are many of these common scripts that you could adapt to explain the actions of your characters. Most of them are more appropriate to villains than to heroes or heroines, but they serve to remind us that people behave as they do **because of some internal reason that is important to them.**



As the creator of these characters, you might hint at these reasons, or you may want to save them for the denouement of a mystery or crime story. You may not need to disclose them at all, but **you should know what they are.**

Another way to provide yourself with 'instant' characters is to **read the profiles which astrologers believe apply to people born under the various star signs.** Again, you don't have to believe the underlying theories, but astrological manuals do provide convenient breakdowns of linked character traits**,** both good and bad, which will help you to round out your characters.

Fiction writers often tell of their characters 'taking over' and doing things that were not intended. Sometimes this works out well, but sometimes the characters go romping off out of control, away from your carefully thought out storyline. This usually happens because you have endowed them with traits which may be coherent in themselves, but not the right ones for the story you are telling.

Sometimes the direct response of 'subconscious-to-writing-hand' takes over and makes the characters behave as you subconsciously know they would. If you don't like what they've done, you can only go back to your original character description, work out what has made them misbehave, and replace it with a more desirable trait. It may be merely a matter of changing the name.

What's in a Name?

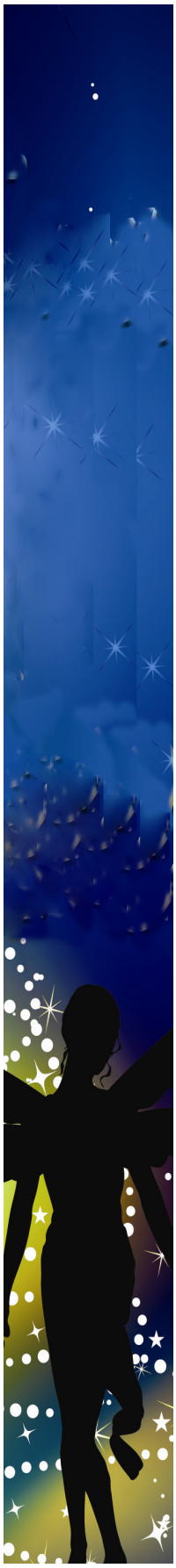
Names have come to typify personalities, and this is particularly true with the diminutive forms. Many boys are christened Michael, but Mike, Mick, or Micky all bring to mind a different type of character.

Similarly, consider the available diminutives of Margaret or Elizabeth: Meg, Maggie, Peggy; Betty, Beth, Lizzie or Liz; **all evoke different types of people.**

Names are also good indicators of **social class.** Jeremy, Toby and Clarissa clearly come from a very different background to Wayne, Sharon and Krystel. This in itself could produce some useful conflict, if, for example, Jeremy's parents lost all their money and had to take him out of private school. There would be an element of rough boys in any comprehensive school who would delight in victimising a child with such a name.

Fashions affect names too, often sparked by show business personalities. There are very few girls around now called Hilda or Gertrude, but there are lots called Kylie. So take care about names in historical stories, from both **fashion** and **class** considerations. A housemaid might be called Mary but not Krystal, while a footman might be called John but not Wayne.

A Hot Insider Tip…
Be careful also, when choosing names for several characters, that they are very different from one another. **If you have a Dick and a Mick in the same**



story, your readers could get confused.

In particular, avoid using several names that begin with the same letter, such as Marvin and Melvyn, Jane and Jenny and Jackie. The only time you can get away with this is with a pair of twins, and even then only if they are identical twins who enjoy getting mixed up.

Syllables

Another good way of avoiding confusion is to choose names with varying numbers of syllables, such as Jane, Mary and Catherine; Tim, Billy and Cameron. It is also wise to avoid adding a single syllable surname to a single syllable forename. Jane Moss is not particularly memorable, but Jane Mossman is, or Susie Moss

Best of all are the names that have a combination of two and three syllables, like Tony Berkinshaw or Pavindra Patel. (Did you know that Scarlett O'Hara was called Pansy in the first draft of 'Gone With The Wind'? It doesn't have quite the same ring, does it?)

Characters' names **are** important, and it is worth taking your time to get them right.

Many authors say that their stories won't come together properly until they've found the right names for their characters.

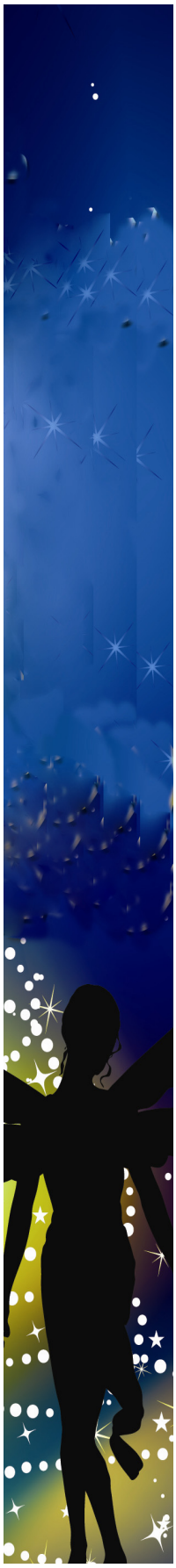
You may want to add a couple of books on forenames and surnames to your personal reference library. Choose a forenames book that tells you when various names were most popular as well as what the names mean.

With surnames, many authors use the telephone directory. For whole names, look through your local newspaper, but be careful not to use real names if your story is set in your home town.

Just as you should build up a collection of character cameos, you should also collect names, particularly those which you can use for ethnic groups different to your own.

Even if your characters don't live in a city, they will probably go to a multi-racial school, and if you are white you could easily get names wrong. Yes, there are plenty of Indian families called Patel, just as there are plenty of English families called Smith, but there are many more that are not.

For instance, the name Singh always belongs to a Sikh, and Kaur is not a family name but a female-only surname. Afro-Carribean names can indicate exactly which part of the Caribbean the family came from and Chinese names can be even more complicated.



If you need a name for such a character, it is much easier to go to your name 'bank' than have to find someone of that race to ask, with all the complications of having to explain why you need to know.

Having considered characters in general, we must now turn our attention to the **three specific types of characters:**

- Heroes and heroines.
- Villains.
- Secondary characters or 'bit players'.

Heroes and Heroines

There is usually only one hero or heroine. There may be a best friend or side-kick who plays a prominent part, but there is normally a **single main character** with whom the reader can identify.

The exception to this is where the readership of the book is increased by having **three or more children having an adventure together** (e.g. The Railway Children). The reader can then select the hero or heroine with which they most closely identify.

Hot Insider Tip…
Because of the ever-present need for reader identification, **the main character should be in the same age bracket and gender as the targeted reader.**

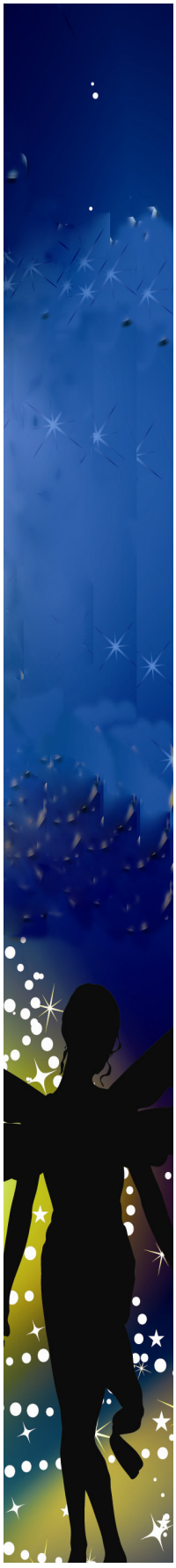
To cover the widest possible range, it is best to make them closer to the top of the age-band rather than the bottom. Children are always eager to be thought **more adult** than they really are. They will look up to (and aspire to be like) a character who is somewhat older than them, but they do not want to identify with a character who is younger than themselves. 12 year olds will not read a story with a 10 year old hero.

Here are the 'Hero' or 'Heroine' age guidelines for the different reader ages:

- For the **under-sixes**, the characterisation need be no more than a name and an age, although the age is usually shown in the pictures rather than stated in the text.

- **Six to nine-year olds** need to be bright and lively. Frequently the story will revolve round their overcoming a fear, such as the fear of dogs, or of being ousted from their parent's affection by a new baby. Even if the story is about something else, it is necessary that they should learn something about life or about themselves by the end of the story.

Jean Ure's Catherine Onslow in **'The Fright'** and other stories about Woodside School is a good example of a timid girl who gets braver and more independent as the series progresses. She even manages, in **'Who's For The**



Zoo?' to persuade the rest of the class, with the aid of their teacher, that they don't want to go to the zoo.

- **Sub-teen characters** need to be far more developed and aware of themselves and their place in the world. They need to have a very definite personality. Writers who are good at characterisation of this age group often find that their readers identify so strongly with the characters that they will write and ask for an address so that they can get in touch with the character.

- **Teenage characters** need to be as fully developed as those in adult novels. The only difference is that they react **more strongly** to the situations in which they find themselves and that their problems will be those which face all teenagers. Will they get through their exams? What career do they want? How do they have fun and still gain the respect of the opposite sex?

Character Growth

Whichever age band your characters come in, they must experience some **character growth** during the story. Only the most rigidly stick-in-the-mud people can go through life without learning something about themselves or life. Such self-satisfied people are rarely prepared to put themselves out or take enough risks to be interesting. Use them as subsidiary characters if you wish, but not as main characters.

Heroes and heroines need to be **doers**, not observers, and they must be up and doing as soon as you introduce them. Ideally they should appear on the first page, as the longer you delay, the more risk you run of readers assuming some other character is the main one.

For example, in **Tony Bradman's 'Tommy Niner and the Planet of Danger',** Tony comes right out in the first line and **tells us who is the hero**:

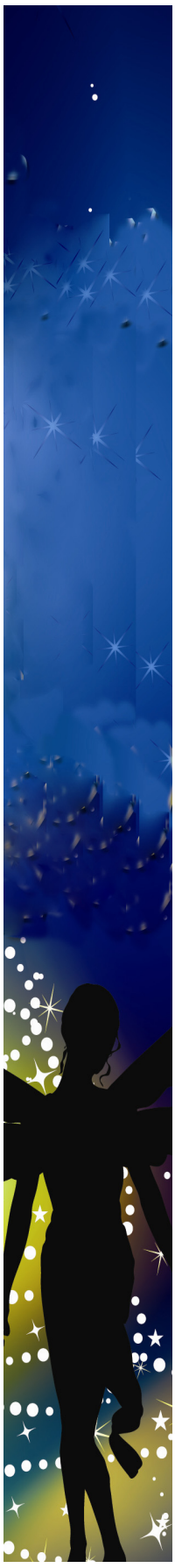
Tommy Niner sat at the controls of the Stardust, the spaceship that was his home.

The fact that the hero's name are the first two words of the book, and that he is 'sitting at the controls' gives the reader a blatant hint about who is the hero!

Whilst your main character *can* have an unusual background such as a circus, it is best if the background is familiar to young people. His desires and motivations should be familiar, but he needs to be **a little tougher** than the norm.

The person who lets life trample on him is not heroic, unless you are telling the story of their decision not to be trampled anymore.

For example, your hero could be the subject of bullies at school until he



decides to spend his pocket money and weekends learning karate. He would assume, as many do, that learning martial arts will make him strong and fast enough to face his enemies and make them leave him alone, but he will discover that it is the inner calm and confidence that renders him impervious to taunts. This could result in the bullies becoming bored and giving up.

Believability

Your character won't be able to learn much karate if he is so short-sighted that he has to wear glasses all the time, so don't go overboard when portraying him as a weakling at the beginning.

Here are some basic rules:

- If your hero or heroine has to perform some particular task to achieve the desired end, **don't make this task impossible by rendering them physically incapable of performing it.**
- If your heroine needs to catch a horse from a field and ride to fetch help, mention **early on** that she is a keen rider. If she has to use a catapult to knock a gun out of a villain's hand at 100 yards, let her be seen practising in her garden in the first couple of chapters, and make her carry her catapult in her back pocket wherever she goes. Never suddenly produce a remarkable ability for your character to solve a critical problem.

Although the ability to develop special skills may be innate, they are never so simple that they go right at the first try. They have to be worked at and practised to develop any level of expertise.

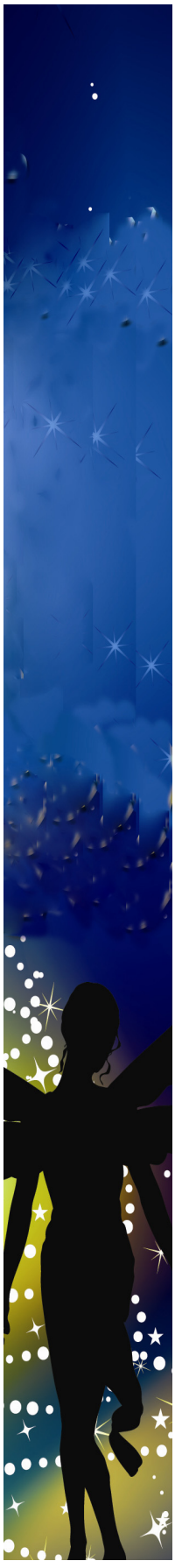
Without showing the practice, you are merely using a weak variant of 'one mighty bound'.

Although your hero or heroine may have a special skill, or higher courage than normal, they should **not be portrayed as perfect** in all respects. Remember, **your reader must identify with this person**.

Perfect people are intensely boring, and nothing exciting or hazardous happens to them because they see it coming and deflect it. Obviously your hero should be more good than bad, **but it is the imperfections which allow your stories to twist along the way.**

Bad traits are often closely linked to good traits.
Here are some examples:

- Someone who is brave is often also impulsive; jumping into danger without thought, or volunteering to do some task that requires knowledge they lack.
- Highly intelligent people who think out the route to avoid obstacles can also procrastinate; paralysed by indecision as they endlessly ponder all the facts.



Important Insider Tip…

Choose your character's bad traits to fit the requirements of your plot - **don't just invent arbitrary faults.**

Allow the impulsive one to lead the rest of her party into the villain's hide-out, where they will be captured. Let the anxiety to solve an embarrassing personal problem lead the hero to leave a trail of damage behind him, as in **'Hiccup Harry'** by **Chris Powling** (A & C Black).

Harry has hiccups at school and can't get rid of them. People tell him various ways to stop hiccups, but all precipitate disasters - the play house collapses, a cupboard falls over because he is climbing on it to get a glass, he tries a handstand in the corridor and kicks the fire alarm...

Of course, by the end of your story, the disadvantages of the bad traits must become obvious to their possessor, who will then resolve to eliminate them.

A good source of **character weaknesses** are the **astrology manuals** that I mentioned earlier.

For example:

Virgos, are said to have the faculty to bring considerable powers of concentration and dexterity to detailed and intricate work, but tend also to become super critical and fussy over details in other areas of their lives. They desire purity and wholesomeness in their food, but can become obsessive over tidiness and cleanliness.

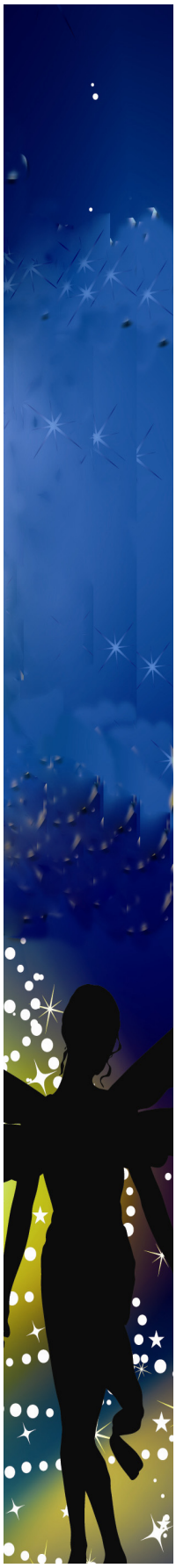
In other words, Virgos make good watch-makers, but can become obsessive nit-pickers. **All virtues, when taken to excess, become their corresponding vices.**

The Seven Deadly Sins

Alternatively, you can use one of the seven deadly sins to decide on a character's weakness.

The seven deadly sins are:

- Sloth
- Gluttony
- Pride
- Lust
- Covetousness
- Anger
- Envy



Choose one which you can adapt to suit your plot requirements. Go gently with this. The purpose of introducing a character flaw is to make your hero or heroine **human** rather than a latter-day Superman or Wonder Woman. Nobody really believes in them, and they won't believe in a perfect hero either. **But if you are heavy-handed in applying flaws, you run the risk of turning your hero into a villain, with whom no youngster will want to identify.**

You don't necessarily need out and out villains. Obviously they are required in stories of crime and suspense, but in many genres they need be no more than antagonist to your main character as protagonist. In fact a lot of authors call their villain the antagonist.

Without a goal to be reached or a problem to be overcome, there is no worthwhile story to be told.

And it is much more interesting if there are competitors for the goal or human causes for the problem.

The antagonists need not be **inherently evil.** This would be crude. Boudicca and her tribesmen have got nothing personal against Marcus' brother Flavius; he just happens to be one of the hated Roman invaders.

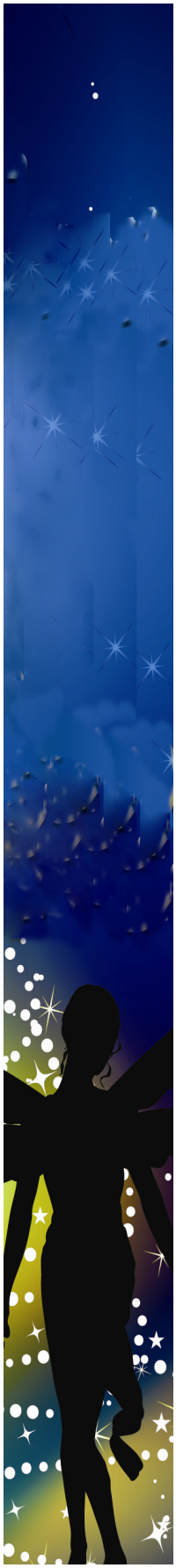
Mary Stanswyke is not an evil girl, just one who is intent on achieving the next step on the ladder to her objective. (With no more than a little fine tuning, she could make the heroine for another story, in which she recognises the error of her ways.)

Real villains, where they are needed, are much easier to cast than heroes, although even they must have some redeeming features. **The exception to this rule is in horror stories and in fantasy, where true evil can be portrayed.**

In all other cases, villains should be shown as having **a reason** for their villainy. It could be a poor upbringing, a major psychological flaw, being bullied at school or living with a cruel guardian.

Word of warning: These days that reason cannot be because of **race**, **religion**, or **physical handicap**. Not nowadays. Even in the UK, where Political Correctness is not as rabidly pursued as in the USA, editors ruthlessly weed out anything that could give offence to any such class of people, let alone a prosecution under the Race Relations Act! Fagin, Fu Man Chu and Long John Silver would invite **instant rejection** if they were offered to a publisher today, as would many Enid Blyton stories ("All Gollys are liars" and "Go and wash your silly black face!" being just two examples!).

Despite these restrictions, your villains must appear **genuinely threatening.** Your heroes should not find victory easy to achieve and, ideally, the villain should be so powerful that the outcome appears to be in the balance. It is the determination to carry on with the necessary task, despite being frightened that



makes for true bravery.

Children like to feel that they would carry on and do the right thing against all odds, and will readily identify with fictional characters who do this.

Children also like to be scared, and taken by surprise, so they like villains who are unpredictable. The villain who smiles sympathetically one minute, lashes out the next and then smiles sweetly again is far nastier than one who is horrid all the time.

All children crave **security,** and so a major device for frightening them is to keep twisting the plot and characters away from the obvious. Note again the use of **contrast**, even within a single character's personality.

Secondary Characters

Although they will not be 'on stage' as much as the main character, your secondary characters should be **proper people**, not just slotted in for the purposes of the plot.

Here are some guidelines:

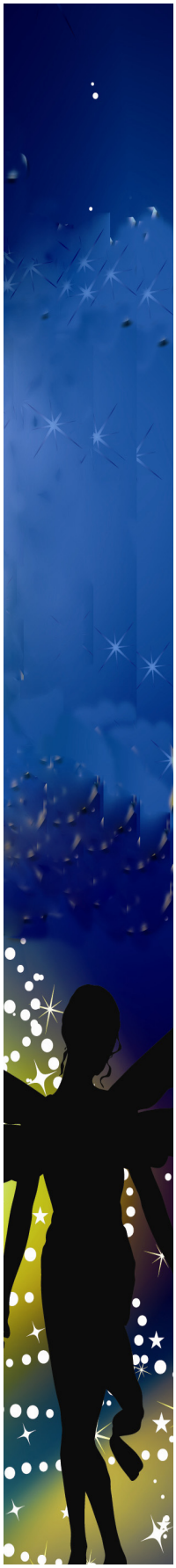
- **Youngest Readers.** In stories for the youngest readers they should be kept to a minimum - three or four friends or school-mates, a couple of teachers, a couple of sets of parents. They will need names and simply defined characteristics. This is often done through the use of animals to provide instant characterisation: Harry the Hippo, Sammy the Seal, Freddy Fox, etc.

- **From eight-years old up.** The secondary characters' need to be almost, but not quite as fully developed as the main character. The friends of the hero or heroine may disclose their inner thoughts, but all the others - parents, teachers, sports instructors, neighbours - should only be described in detail **if they are to take part in the action.**

For example, having your hero say "Hello" to Mrs Morris next door as they pass on their front paths is fine. This is a normal, everyday occurrence. There's no need to describe her as any more than 'Mrs Morris next door' unless she takes a larger part in the story. In fact, if you DO describe her, the reader will expect that she will appear later in some significant way. This is one of the many conventions of fiction – you don't dwell on the irrelevant.

Describe your **secondary characters** in terms of their function in the story. If the swimming instructor only ever appears during lessons at the baths, there is no need to go off at a tangent about his home life. What is important is his physique, how he dresses for work, how he tackles the job of teaching and how he interacts with his pupils during lessons.

Probably the most difficult secondary characters to deal with are the main



characters' parents. Even if they do not take an active part in the story, you cannot ignore them altogether, since children have to go home from school every day.

The answer lies in mentioning them enough to give a flavour of home life without getting bogged down in unnecessary scenes of domesticity.

But beware: Don't portray a family where Dad goes out to work, always drives the car and is a skilled handyman, while Mum stays at home to cook and iron. As you can imagine, this is unpopular with editors who nowadays want to see more equality. (And can I mention that the overwhelming majority of such people are female!)

Sometimes this can be carried to the opposite extreme, with father behaving like a fluffy dim blonde while mother takes over the car, the DIY and the wage-earning. This creates **a new stereotype every bit as irritating as the old pre-liberation version**.

As you know, stereotypes of any sort should be avoided. Superman heroes, hooded or masked bully-boy criminals, hard-bitten detectives, or chauvinistic fathers, are all inexcusable manifestations of the writer who cannot be bothered to create credible characters.

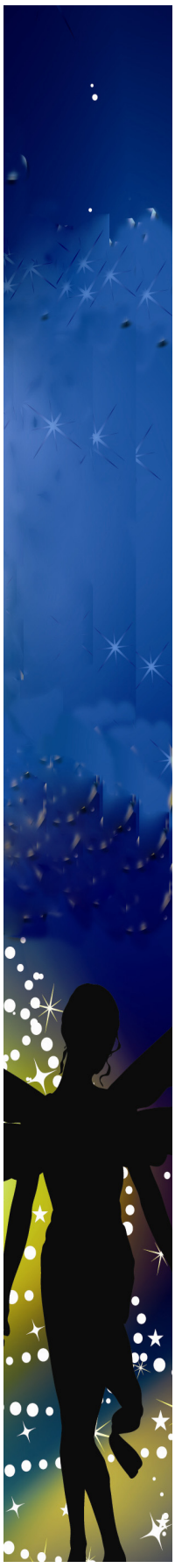
Using stereotyped characters is as lazy as falling back on clichés in your writing. In Conan Doyle's time, if he wanted an instant villain he merely had to introduce a Chinese person. His readers would immediately know that here was an evil adversary. Racial stereotyping was a kind of character shorthand. It saved much work, but nowadays you must realise that it is **completely unacceptable.**

Overcoming these problems means that you have to work much harder to create an acceptable villain. If Political Correctness becomes any stronger, it will become impossible to have villains in stories, as all villains will be seen as victims of their circumstances (which, in the main, they are) and hence **not really responsible** for their actions. If they are not responsible, it will be seen as politically incorrect to **cast them in the role of a 'bad' person.**

This has already happened in the USA to a very large extent (which doesn't seem to have stopped their prison population topping 1% of the total population!). The result (as with all censorship) is that books become blander and more 'Vanilla'. It is for society to decide whether this is a price worth paying.

Writing with Worldwide Selling Rights in Mind

Today it is expected that even stories written about a set of predominantly white characters should reflect the true situation in our schools and include some Afro-Carribbean and Asian children. They should not be singled out in any way, but treated like all the other characters, reflecting the true situation



that they are a part of our normal life, and therefore not needing **special** mention.

This is one of the areas where you will be taken firmly in hand by your editors, who will be concerned not only that you **avoid giving offence** to any class of people in this country, but that your book will also be **acceptable in America.** Selling rights for publication in other countries is a lucrative part of publishing, and America is the largest English-speaking market.

'Preferred Terminology' and 'Political Correctness' originated in the USA, and American editors are much pickier about it than their English counterparts. They even consider that *failing* to mention, say, children from other cultures, is to 'put them down' by deliberately ignoring them.

Market Demands

Despite what you personally feel about all this, remember that you are selling to a market NOT creating high art. **If you want to be successful (and published), you must provide what the market wants, dictated by current fashions and trends.**

Please read that again!

There is nothing unique about your situation. All people who produce any goods or services must produce what the market demands. Attempts to produce products that are not demanded will result in failure. It is that simple. So:

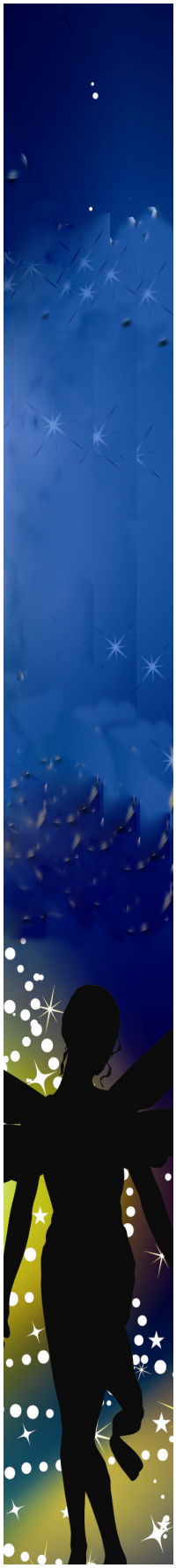
- No more 'housewives'. They have to be called 'homemakers'
- Police**men** have to be 'officers' or 'constables'.
- You shouldn't say 'Christian name', because few Asians are Christians, so now it has to be 'first name'.

You may not write anything that implies people from other races, are not good-looking if they have features that do not conform to Western standards of beauty, nor that their values are faulty if they do not conform to Western values. These sins are known as 'lookism' and 'Eurocentrism'. There are a whole heap of 'isms' to be aware of!

You will not be allowed to say anything pejorative about the disabled, not even at the first remove by referring to the able-bodied as 'normal'. This is only permissible if it is done by an ignorant character who is promptly told off for it by one of your other characters.

All of this means that you have to be **extremely careful** when choosing your villains. They may not be:

- Disabled (even that word is fast becoming non-PC as it implies such people have no abilities, which is plainly ridiculous.)



- Described by their religion or occupation.
- Portrayed as being mentally handicapped.

Some editors even go farther and say that they should not have any emotional abnormality. **Given that it is also fashionable to deny that evil exists, you may wonder how these editors account for the existence of any criminals!**

Such considerations have become a fact of life for those who write for children, and one that you must take into account, whether you accept the underlying precepts or not. It requires you to do the equivalent of tiptoeing through a minefield.

You will appreciate the rule that your characters should not do things that could put readers who copy them into danger ("Don't try this at home, folks!"). Your characters should not play on building sites, railway lines or around farm machinery; talk to strangers or stray dogs; eat berries from the hedgerows; help themselves to medicine; or smoke cigarettes, let alone consider experimenting with alcohol or drugs.

On the other hand, whilst you should not put foul language into the mouths of any of your characters (including villains) you do not have to pretend that life does not have its seamy side. Even quite young children have access to the television news, Internet, videos and newspapers, and they are fully aware of what goes on in the world, in general if not in detail.

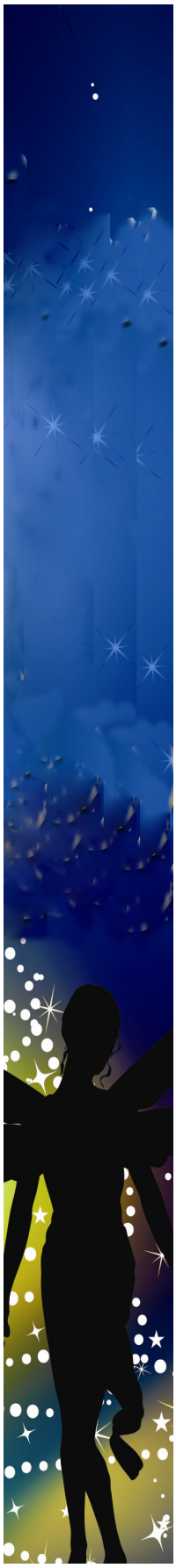
Joining a Writers' Group

If there is a writers' group in your area, do join it. Most groups meet once a month and some have additional workshop meetings as well. The best groups are those which only accept as full members, people who have been published in at least magazine form, but they will usually accept newcomers as associate members.

Writing is essentially a lonely occupation, and it does help to meet other people who have encountered the problems you will inevitably meet along the way. There is a tremendous camaraderie amongst writers, and even established professionals feel that they should 'put something back' in gratitude for the help and encouragement they received when they were beginners.

The average writers' group will consist of a mixed bag of authors, from those who contribute short paragraphs to local newspapers to those who write historical romances, but there are always some members who write for children. All will be generous with their support and advice on how to get round a problem with your story, or which magazine or publisher to try.

There are also several, easily affordable, short residential courses for writers. These offer tuition and discussions with established writers, usually in peaceful rural surroundings.



The **Arvon Foundation** has centres in Devon, Yorkshire and the Scottish Highlands and runs regular courses at all of them. Write to them at Totleigh Barton, Beaworthy, Devon EX21 5NS or Lumb Bank, Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire HX7 7PQ, or Moniak Mhor, Moniak, Kirkhill, Inverness IV5 7PQ.

Fen Farm in Norfolk offers five day courses throughout the year. Write for details to Sally Worboyes, 10 Angel Hill, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk IP33 1UZ.

There are weekend courses at Missenden Abbey, Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire HP10 0BD.

Writing magazines and the Internet give full details of writer's groups and courses.

Common Mistakes

Failing to Follow Publisher's 'Editorial Requirements' Guides

All publishers, of books as well as magazines, will send you their 'house style' and 'house image' leaflets. It is silly not to pay attention to what these say, for if you fail to comply with the guidelines, your book will be rejected as soon as the publisher has read enough of it to see that it does not fit their stated requirements. This is usually the first page only!

The guides will give details of the types of story and character they require for each category in their lists, and tell you which **age bands** they are aiming at. As these age bands do vary from publisher to publisher, check that the ages you have chosen for your main characters are appropriate.

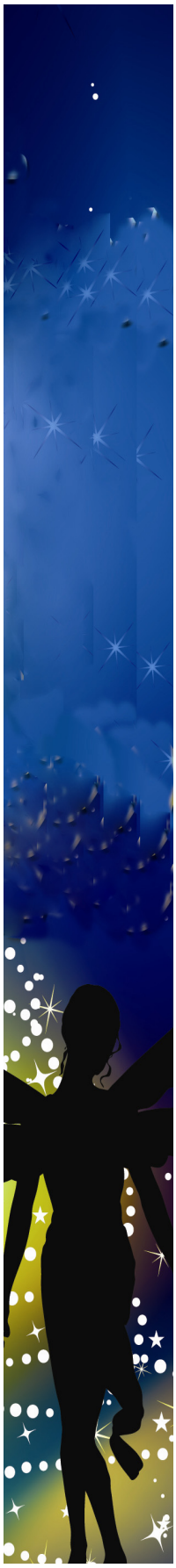
Your readers will expect the main characters to be very nearly the same age as them and they will not want to read about children younger than they are. Don't make the mistake of thinking that you will appeal to a wider band of readers by writing about the adventures of a twelve-year old hero and his six-year old sister. **Twelve-year old boys consider small sisters to be a major pain, and six-year old girls can't cope with the level of language a twelve-year old requires**, so you end up by pleasing neither.

Hot Insider Tip…

When you write the final draft of your first book, tailor it to the requirements of the publisher you intend to send it to.

If they decide they don't want it, as well as checking that there is nothing inherently wrong with your writing, decide which publisher you want to send it to next and check that it complies with their requirements.

If this means you have to re-write sections to make it fit, do so, and continue to



do this every time you have to send it to another publisher. This doesn't mean just altering the stated age of characters, it means changing any sections that indicate their age, such as mention of the class they are in at school or how soon they expect to sit exams.

Publishers reject unsolicited books for many reasons, but one of the most common is that they will not fit that publisher's list. They often add a note to the rejection slip that says 'Not for us'.

That's all for this month! Good luck and enjoy your writing until next month when I have more information on how to become a millionaire children's author.

Scott Thornton