How to Become a Millionaire Children's Author

LESSON ONE

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.

"Scott Thornton" is a pseudonym for the author who wishes to remain anonymous. The author has made several million pounds from his (or her!) own writing.

For legal reasons we are obliged to state the following:

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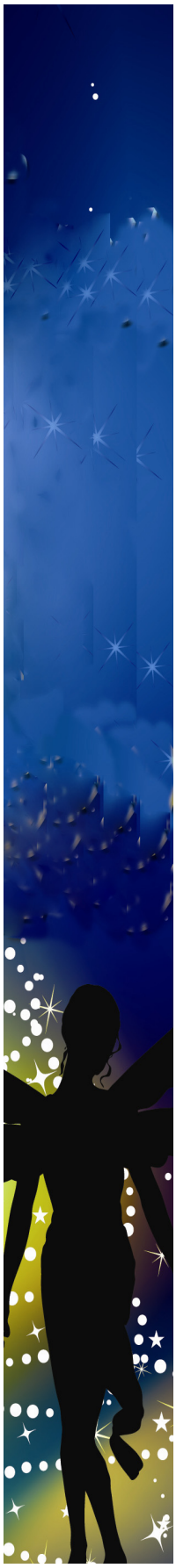


Welcome and a huge 'Thank You' for purchasing Lesson One of the twelve part course, ***'How to Become a Millionaire Children's Author'***. I know you're going to be thrilled with all of the hottest and latest insider tips and techniques you can use to build your own personal wealth from writing children's books.

Sales of children's books have soared in the last ten years with authors gaining the same status and wealth as pop stars and footballers.

J K Rowling's multi-million pound earnings from writing the series of Harry Potter books began with an idea she had during a four hour train journey.

So how did she develop that idea into a series of books and films that took her from a struggling unknown author to the rich and famous 'A' list personality?

Here how JK Rowling got started:

- During that four hour train journey, she used the time to think about her idea.
- Back home she immediately started writing down those thoughts – before they were forgotten.

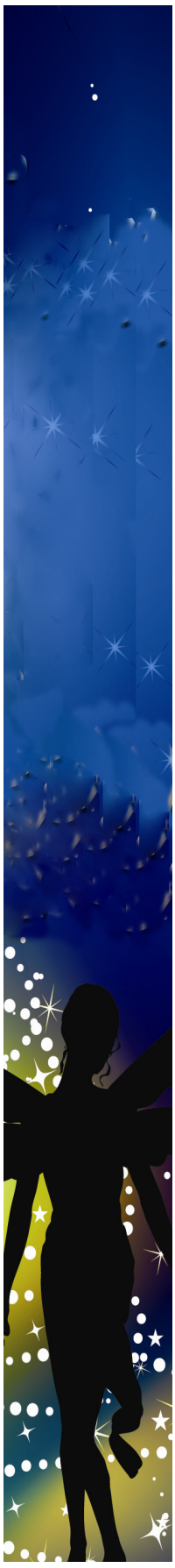
This is what J K Rowling did next:

- She wrote loads of background information notes that would never make their way into any of her books, including a history of the death eaters. They were written for her own pleasure and because she personally likes to read books where she feels confident that the writer knows everything about the characters and their lives.
- She brainstormed to find the name for the dementors.
- Chapter one was written about thirteen times. Each version was discarded because they all gave too much of the plot away.
- Just for her own reference, J K drew pictures of her characters and a sequence of drawings of the entrance to diagon alley so she could be certain the description of getting into diagon alley worked well.

She believed in her story and wanted to give it her best shot. But she didn't know if anyone else would like the book and she was a complete unknown.

However, she sent off her first book to two agents and one took her on. The agent, Christopher Little, had a hard time selling the book to publishers. It was considered to be too long, and a wizard school was not considered politically correct.

The advance fee for the first book of the series was £2,500. The advance for the second book was £100,000.



Prior to the launch of 'Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows', 350 million of her books had been sold and the series translated into 65 languages!

Some other results are:

- The Harry Potter books have been sold in more than 200 countries.
- Books on tape/CD sell nearly as well as the books.
- The books have hit the world of Book Collecting. Some of the past payments made have been £8,000 for a first book edition and £25,000 for books 1 – 4, first editions.
- Estimates of JK's earnings are as high as £250 million (which JK says is wrong).
- There have been merchandising deals with people like Coca-Cola.
- In Toronto 12,000 people paid up to £200 a ticket to see and hear JK reading from one of her books.
- Because the 'Best Seller List' was dominated by three of JK's books, a separate 'Children's Best Seller List' was created.
- America put JK into the list of power people.
- The last book of the series, sold 7,000 copies a minute (just UK and USA sales) 2.6 million in UK and over 8 million in USA, during the launch from one minute past midnight on 21st July 2007 until seven am.

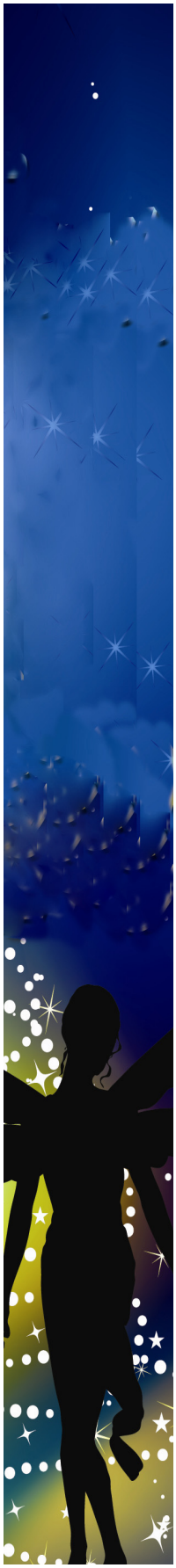
Here are some tips on how JK Rowling made it to the top of the writing profession with her Harry Potter series:

- JK's memories of her childhood have had a big influence on her writing. She remembers so vividly what it felt like to be a child.
- All seven books of the series were plotted before the first book was finished.
- The first book, 'Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone' took five years to write. It took shape from the collection of notes into a book.

JK Rowling's advice to new writers is:

"Read as much as you can, read anything. It will teach you what you like, increase your vocabulary. At first you will probably hate what you write but sooner or later you will produce something you like."

So are you ready to join the lucrative and exciting world of writing for children? As you can see from the information on J K Rowling, it's not just books that sell it's all the spin-offs from the most popular stories.



The Spin-offs are:

- Recordings
- Films
- Licensing
- Merchandising
- Worldwide Book Sales

The world of children's stories is truly a multi-billion worldwide phenomena.

And every story starts as an idea! And that idea is developed into a book.

Welcome to the magical world of how to find and turn an idea into a book and become a millionaire children's author. Step this way and start your journey…

Getting Started

There are five main practical elements that produce page-turning fiction. They are:

1. **Planning**
2. **Setting**
3. **Viewpoint**
4. **Plotting**
5. **Characterisation**

These are the 'nuts and bolts' of fiction and you must pay attention to all of these elements if the story is to be a success. I'll explain each of these a bit further on, because you need to know about…

The 'Three Cs'

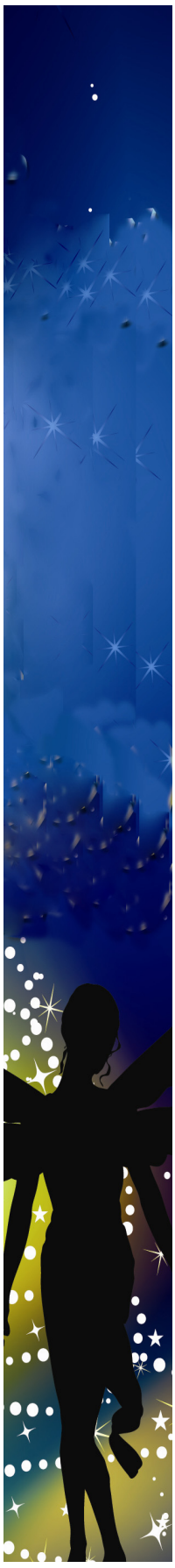
Besides these practical elements, there are three 'artistic' attributes which most good stories and plays have. When you are starting out, you would do well to ensure that your stories have a hefty helping of all three. Known as the 'three Cs' they are:

- **Character**
- **Contrast**
- **Conflict**

Here are fuller details of each of the 'three Cs':

Character

There must be several, strongly drawn and different characters. The more **believable** your characters are the better chance you have of writing a great story.



This means that even if you are writing a science fiction or fantasy novel, and perhaps your characters are from another planet, they must still have recognizable personality traits and mannerisms.

Contrast

For example:

- Light and shade.
- Tears and happiness.
- Anger and love.
- Summer and winter.
- Fast parts of the story and more leisurely, reflective parts.

Conflict

All good stories have one or more strands of conflict running through them.

For example:

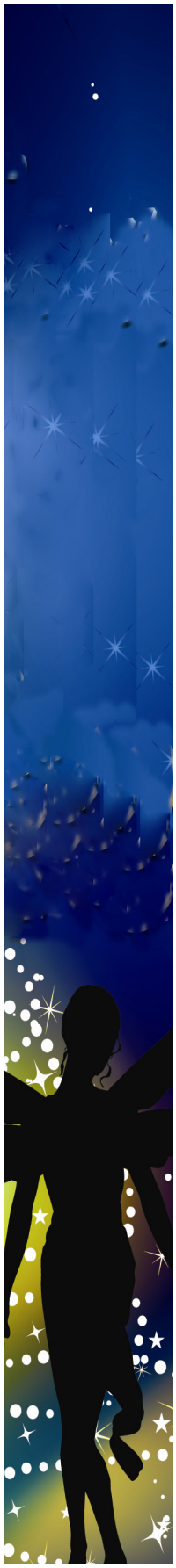
- Boy against the aggressor.
- Girl who wants to go to University but also wants to nurse her dying horse.
- Good versus Evil.

Important note: In children's fiction, conflict is almost always resolved in the end. The vast majority of children find inconclusive, unresolved endings unsatisfactory (as indeed do most adults!)

Remember that all good stories have the three 'Cs'. If even just one of them is missing the story may seem one dimensional and weak. It is an interesting fact that the more sophisticated the audience (= older), the more different strands of character, contrast and conflict you can have running through the story.

For young readers, you might have just one strong character (Polly Pirate) who has one conflict (trying to find her lost treasure) with one or two contrasts (slower descriptive bit, followed by a fierce battle on an island). However, even in the simplest, good story, **all three elements are present**.

As the target audience gets older, you can weave more complex 'sub-plots' of conflict into the stories. You can have several 'strong' characters (contrasting, of course) and you can introduce many levels of light and shade, fast moving parts and slow moving parts.



The skill in correctly targeting your reader, is to identify what level of complexity in the three Cs, they are able to accept. A Shakespearean play, for example, has many levels of intricate subtlety in contrast, conflict and character - which is what makes them so good, of course!

Now, let's take a closer look at three of the five practical elements of a story.

Two of these elements, **Plotting** and **Characterisation**, will be dealt with in depth later in the course. The other three elements are **Planning, Setting** and **Viewpoint**.

The Planning Stage

Hot Insider Tip…

Published authors who produce stories and novels without first planning them are few and far between. The clue of course, is in the words **'published authors'**!

Would-be writers who believe that they should 'wait for their muse and let the words fall out', are surprised when they discover they need carefully to plan their books by writing a detailed outline.

The industry recognized description of this outline, is a synopsis (which means 'to see with one eye or as a whole'.

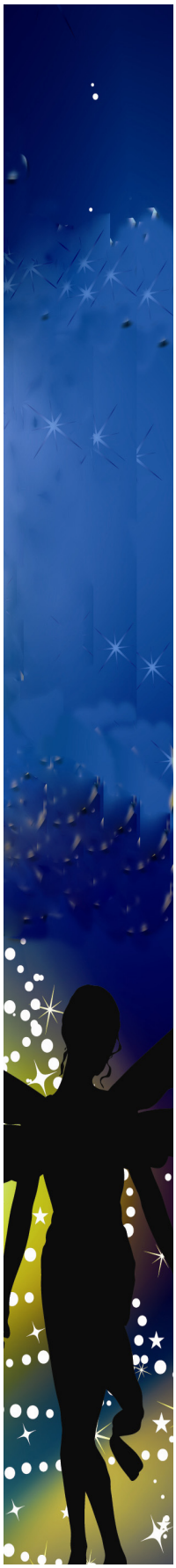
"Oh, I couldn't do that," many new writer's protest, "I have no idea what is going to happen in advance, my characters just sort of take over and guide the plot along." So with only a very vague idea of their story, they fire-up their computers and pitch headlong into writing.

These are the results for ninety-nine out of every hundred would-be writers with this attitude:

- They start at page one, write feverishly for a while until they get stuck and eventually give up.
- The few who do manage to complete a whole rambling book, then wonder why it comes back with a rejection slip that says, if anything, 'inadequate plotting' or 'lacks pace'.

They can then retire to nurse their wounds and wonder why the 'blind' publishers cannot see their genius. They will probably also pontificate loud and long to anyone who will listen about how all the publishers want these days is formularized pap.

What has happened is that, because they didn't know where they were going, they got lost on the way. If you were to set off on a journey through a strange country, without the benefit of a map, then you would not be too surprised if you ended up in some random place, having taken a strangely irrelevant route



to get there! It is the same when writing a book.

Your synopsis is the 'map' to guide you through the story.

And if you think a synopsis sounds like a lot of extra hard work, let me tell you that:

The quickest route to writing a complete story or book is by planning it first!

All professional writers do a synopsis. Even millionaire best-sellers who sign lucrative three-book deals have a contract that says 'subject to acceptable outlines or synopses' (synopses is plural of synopsis).

The most sensible thing to do with your first book, rather than investing the time and nervous energy needed in writing a whole book, is to prepare a detailed synopsis (and if you're concerned about how to write a synopsis, everything you need to know is fully explained within this course). Send it to your chosen publisher with at least one completed chapter. Some publishers prefer three.

Important Insider Tip…

If you send one chapter always make it the first and if three, the first three. **Never send random chapters.** Neither publishers nor agents tell you this, but believe me, if you ever are tempted to send random chapters (e.g. chapters 4, 8 and 11 because you think they are the best), it will brand you as a novice immediately.

If you appear to have genius you may be offered a contract straight away. However, few of us will fall into that category. It is more likely, if they approve the outline and your style, that they will ask to see the whole book.

Most children's books are between 20,000 to 60,000 words and your synopsis will run to several pages.

The exception to sending a synopsis is if your book is for very small children and contains less than 100 words.

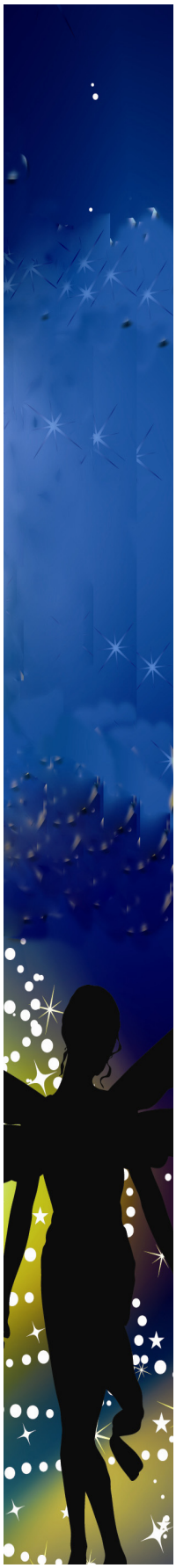
Pitching Your Story

Hot Insider Tip…

Every successful writer knows that…

You should ideally be able to describe your whole story in a single sentence!

If not a single sentence, then you must be able to explain what your story is about in a *brief* verbal or written pitch. Just to make sure you don't get



confused, a pitch is not the same as a synopsis.

- The job of a synopsis is to give an outline of the major twists and turns of plot and information on the main characters.
- The job of a pitch is to explain in as few words as possible, what the heart of a story is about.

So why have I included pitching your story or novel into the section on planning? The answer is simple but powerfully important; if you cannot describe what your story is about quickly and simply, then…

- The idea won't truly work as a story.
- At best the story will be weak and therefore worthless.

This simple idea of working out your pitch *before* you write your story can save you endless wasted hours and money!

And once you have finished a children's short story, novel or script, whatever medium you've written for, you'll want to sell it. Everybody, from your family to agents, publishers, producers, directors, actors and network people **will want to know what your story is about before they read one word of your completed work.** If what you tell them is not compelling you can count that as lost sales because they simply do not have time to wade through dozens of pages of thousands of manuscripts.

Here are some words of wisdom from the Producer, Stephen Cannell: ***"A good idea, badly presented, sounds like a bad idea."***

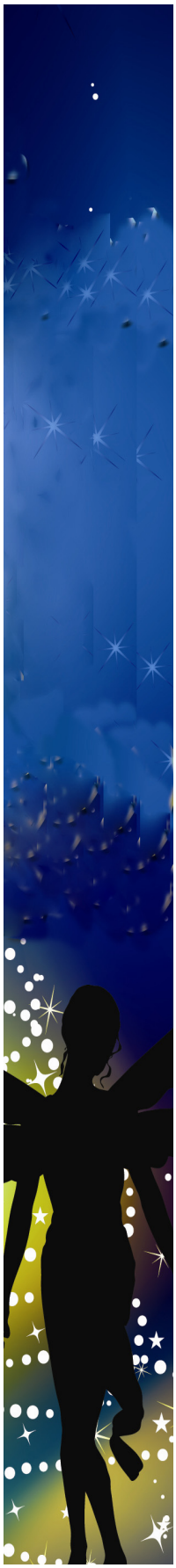
I've dug out some information on written pitches for you from my swipe files. First, here are two examples of what is **not a pitch**:

- **Shrek:** "An instant classic – you care more about the donkey than the entire cast of *Planet of the Bleedin" Apes.*" **Ian Crabb, Maidstone**
- **Fantastical Adventures of the Invisible Boy by Lloyd Alexander:** "This book is delightful, a warm homage to creativity and the power of the imagination." **Tes Teacher**

Neither of those two descriptions gives the reader the slightest idea of what this story is about, I hope you agree. They are the equivalent of: "Great book! I couldn't put it down. Loved the man character to bits."

Here are some examples to show **what a pitch is**:

- **Kiss of Death by Malcolm Rose**: A school trip turns into a nightmare when Kim and Wes leave the plague-village of Eyam with more than they bargained for, and a stolen artifact wreaks revenge.



- **THE LAST BOOK IN THE UNIVERSE by Rodman Philbrick**: In a land dominated by vicious gangs and mindprobe entertainment, Spaz is alone. His foster sister is the only good thing in his life and she is dying. Determined to save her, Spaz bravely sets out into dangerous and forbidden territory, accompanied only by an old man, with his philosophies and memories of what the world once was.

Written pitches for selling to the public are usually longer than verbal pitches you use to tell marketing people what your story is about. Both of the above book examples were written to attract sales from the buying public. Think 'blurb on the back of the dust jacket' and you have a good idea of the pitch. Also look at the film descriptions on DVD jackets – they are excellent examples written by people who really know their business.

Think it's impossible to crunch your masterpiece down tone or two pithy lines? How about this for Alice in Wonderland:

Alice falls asleep one lazy summers day. She awakes to see a white rabbit which she follows down a rabbit hole. There she has many curious adventures in a mysterious place called Wonderland. She meets a Mad Hatter and the Red Queen. Eventually she is tried at a court of playing cards. Was it all a dream?

Next, I want to show you what you can achieve by condensing your story into a single sentence. This is not working out a great and exciting pitch to sell your story, **but a pitch for you as the writer to check your idea is good before you write even one word of the story.**

Here are three examples, each stated in a single sentence which I'm going to label as, John's story, Susan's story and Marcus's story simply for easy identification.

John's Story

'John, aged 9, moves house with his parents and has difficulties settling into his new school.'

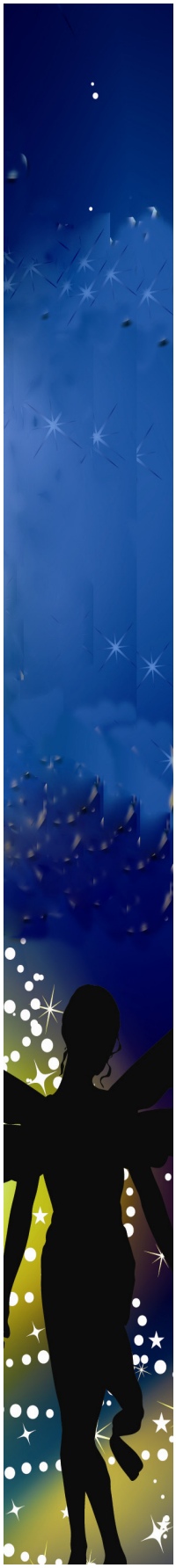
Let's check this against the three C's…

Contrast:

- Old school compared with new school.
- Old surroundings and friends compared with new surroundings and friends, etc.

Conflict:

- Wanting to make the move smooth for his parents, but hating the new school.
- Loyalty to his old best friend versus a new friendship springing up at school.



- Conflict between the pacifism preached by his parents, and the knowledge that he has to face the school bullies and win them around.

Character:

- John.
- The school bully.
- John's new best friend, etc.

Susan's Story

'Susan is poor, Mary is rich, but they both want to go to a music college.'

Contrast:

- Rich home compared with poor home.
- Plenty of money to spend compared with little or no money.

Conflict:

- The private music college is expensive and hence impossible, unless Susan wins that vital scholarship.
- Mary's parents want her to be a doctor and consider a career in music to be frivolous and beneath her.

Character:

- Susan and Mary (who should obviously be very different characters, which can lead to some conflict which makes for contrast which...)

Marcus' Story

'Marcus travels across Roman Britain searching for his brother Flavius, who has been captured by Boudicca.'

Contrast:

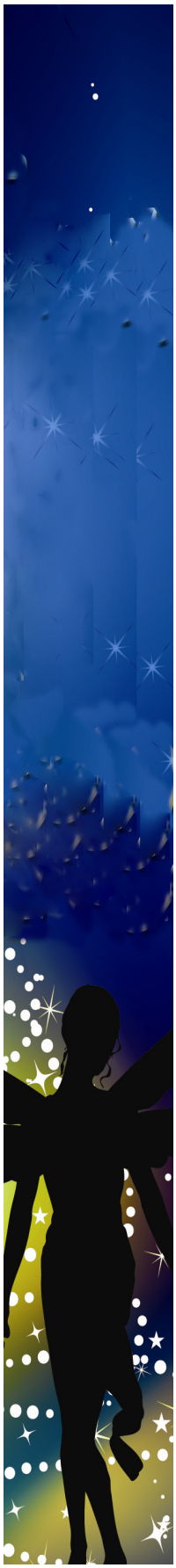
- Safety of Marcus' village compared with wildness and danger of outside countryside.
- Journey compared with battle.
- Boy growing up to be a man.

Conflict:

- Actual battles, daring and dangerous situations along the way (robbers, wild animals etc.)
- Perhaps his desire to stay and help someone along the way conflicts with his desire to get moving to save his brother at the earliest moment.

Character:

- Marcus and the 'goodies' and 'baddies' he meets on his journey.



You should write down your story idea in **one line** like this, and then outline the conflict, contrast and character of your story.

Put down as bare bones like this, you can see whether you really do have something to write about.

TIP: If you cannot do this simple task you should abandon all hopes of being a writer here and now. I am that serious!

Let's look at each story idea more closely:

John's Story

John's problem is common and one that has been written about many times. So these are some of the questions the writer of this idea would ask:

- What is going to be *different* about this version of the story because as stated it is not very original?
- How is John going to resolve his problems and gain acceptance and friendship from his school-mates?
- Does he have a special talent that they will find useful?
- Or is the story about overcoming his fear of bullies and facing them down?

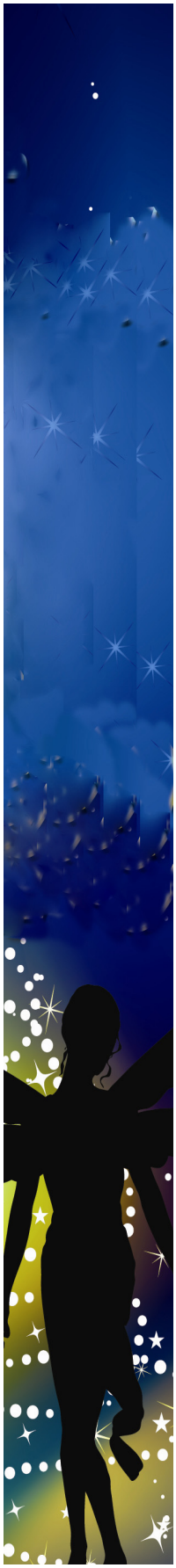
Susan's Story

Susan and Mary are unlikely to know each other. The rich and the poor tend to live separately and go to separate schools. So these are some of the questions the writer of this idea would ask along with some answers:

- **Q.** How do they know each other? **A.** Perhaps they are interacting because they both go to the same music teacher for out of school lessons?
- **Q.** Why should we *care* about their desire to go to a music college? Mary's parents can afford to send her if she wants to go, so that's not a problem, but unless Susan can win a scholarship, she can't afford the fees. If she does win the scholarship, she can afford it, so what's the problem (conflict)? **A.** Only **one place** free at the college this year? (Now there's a *real* problem and the potential for conflict between the two girls. Maybe it can look all along as though the richer girl is going to walk it. Perhaps she can even be bitchy and superior – but this hides a softer side and due to something Susan does, Mary has a realization that Susan is a better musician and that she – Mary – did not really want to be a musician but a vet, or whatever. The story is beginning to take shape but do you see how it is all based around conflict and its resolution?)

Marcus' Story

Marcus' story is much more straightforward. He sets out on a quest, meets and



overcomes various problems (conflicts) on the way, and eventually finds his brother. All the writer needs to worry about is ensuring that his obstacles and solutions are credible and not too mundane.

Of these three stories, Marcus' is probably going to be the most complex, so let's do a little more work on planning it. I'm going to continue this section, as if you were working on the story idea of Marcus.

Marcus is going to undertake a long and hazardous journey, with at least three major incidents along the way. Any less than three and it would be a travelogue, not an adventure. It has to be a long journey to keep the drama going and to space out the incidents. But not to long as the reader will get impatient for them to 'get there' (but consider the interminably drawn out travel sequences in Lord of the Rings!)

Already you can see that there are going to be an awful lot of details and people involved in this story; far more than you can easily keep in your head.

At this point I want to make a plea for originality – and this is where your creativity will come in. It is too easy (yes, and lazy) to have Marcus attacked by a bear, wolves and then later by robbers. Yawn. We could have seen that coming. Better would be a flock of eagles (I have no idea why!) and a traveling music show who want a boy for their act – initially they seem friendly but then their ulterior motive is revealed as they seek to drug and kidnap him. Are you starting to get this?)

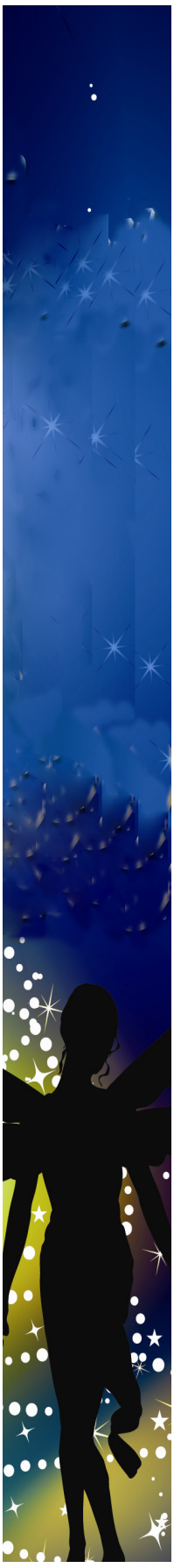
Mapping Chapters

The next step in planning the story of Marcus and Flavius is to map out your chapters to see what should happen in each. About twenty chapters is usual in a story for this age range, so start by writing the chapter numbers down one side of a large sheet of paper. Then space your main incidents out between the beginning and the end.

The first two or three chapters will be about the news of his brother's capture reaching Marcus and his deciding to do something about it whilst struggling against things which conspire to stop him (mother needs him to look after younger sister; elder in the village counsels against it; sweetheart begs him not to go – to the tune of 'Billy Don't Be a Hero!'. ☺)

The last two or three chapters will equally obviously have to be about his finding and possibly releasing his brother. (Twist – when he finally gets to his brother, maybe he *doesn't* want to be 'rescued' for some reason and needs persuading?)

This leaves fourteen or fifteen chapters **in the middle** for the journey and the incidents along the way. Slot them in approximately evenly. If you don't know at this stage what each incident is going to be, just write 'incident' on your plan. Or if you know the type of incident but have not yet decided exactly



what, then type ‘attacked by wolves’ for example, knowin you will change it later when you have a brilliant idea (or steal my flock of eagles idea!)

Already you have moved from a simple story-line to a more structured outline and your story is starting to take shape.

Now you have to ask yourself some questions that will flesh out the story.

For example:

- Why was Marcus a long way away from his brother?
- Is Flavius a soldier? How did he get captured?
- Boudicca did capture Camulodunum (Colchester) and almost destroyed the Ninth Legion, so that could explain Flavius being there, but where is Marcus when the story begins? If his father was a soldier too, the family could live at any of the big military towns. How about Isca Silurum (Caerleon) in South Wales? It would take several weeks to get from there to East Anglia. Marcus could be too young to join up and fight.

That’s taken care of some of the background information, so next you would ask **questions about the actual storyline.**

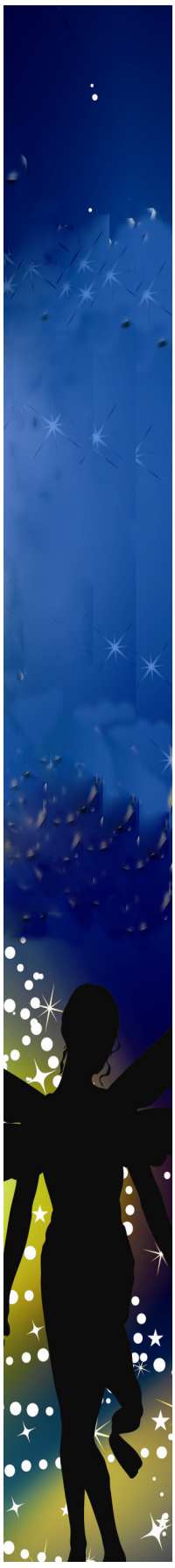
For example:

- What route would Marcus take?
- Are there any obvious natural hazards on the way that could provide one of the incidents? He would have to cross the Severn, which is deep unless they go further north than Gloucester. That's a week's journey by horse or foot from Isca, so if they wanted to save time, they might try crossing where it is deep and dangerous. They might even fall foul of the Severn Bore. Check your seasons!
- On their way across the centre of the country, they would be crossing several tribal boundaries, with the tribes at war with each other as well as with the Romans. That gives scope for at least one major battle and a skirmish or perhaps an ambush in the forest?

These questions have highlighted **a background information problem which needs to be answered:**

- How come Marcus is able to go off on his own? Is he old enough to make this sort of decision with his family's blessing; or is he orphaned, perhaps living with an aunt? If old enough, how come he didn’t go with his brother to start with? Do you see hw you need to hammer out these fine details if your story is to be credible?

Here’s a practical problem that needs answering:



- *How* is he going to travel? And please don't answer 'by intercity train'! Even mature fighting men would think twice before travelling on their own through the territories of hostile tribes in Roman times. A mere strip of a lad wouldn't last five minutes. Perhaps he sneaks away and gets a job with a pack-train, or tags along with a contingent of soldiers. Or picking up hat music theme, joins a traveling circus or band of musicians. (Did such things exist then? Do your research!)

By the time you have completed this exercise, asking yourself 'Why?' and 'What if…' and 'Then what happens?' at every stage, you will have enough detailed material to rough out each chapter.

TIP: 'Why' is about the most important question you can continually ask about every element of your story. Neophyte authors often make their characters move around without sufficient motivation. **Characters should have a motivation for everything they do from reaching for a biscuit to going on a quest for the fabled golden pendant of Zanthros.**

You will also have a fair idea of **the characters** needed to make the story.

- Marcus and Flavius.
- His parents or aunt or guardian or whatever.
- The person who breaks the news at the beginning.
- The leader of the pack-train and his other helpers (or the troop of soldiers, musicians etc.).
- Some horses, perhaps a dog.
- All the people they encounter along the way. This would include some chance-met travellers, a tavern-keeper, a sinister tribesman who spies on them, the warriors who ambush them, and various people at Boudicca's camp at the end.

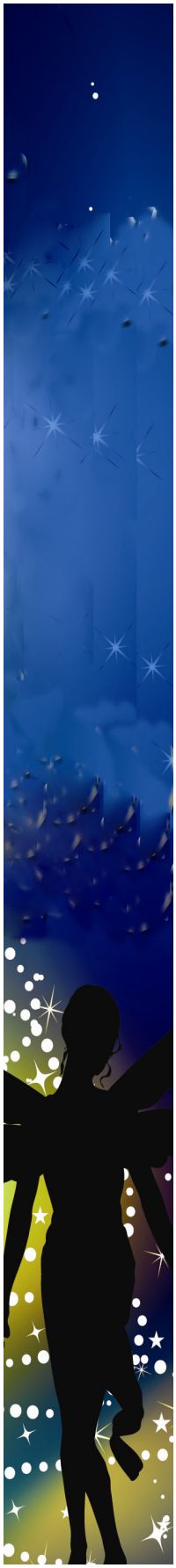
Make a separate list of your characters, and show where each character appears and departs in your rough chapters. I will discuss characters in greater depth later in the course. For now you need have only a sketchy picture of all except the main character.

Your next task is to go back to your rough chapters and consider the story points. These are the incidents that keep the story moving along to give pointers on what is going to happen later in the book.

Books for children need to build to at least one climax, and speed up their pace as they near the end.

This is especially important in adventure stories, and you need to decide how you are going to achieve it early in the planning process. Because…

- Too big an excitement near the beginning and the rest will be anti-climax.



- Insufficient excitement and your readers will get bored and give up.

Next, let's take a look at how to create a great hero.

Character Identification

First realise this is a story about a boy on a great adventure and thus your readership is predominantly boys of a similar age (or slightly younger) to Marcus. His age is critical to your readership. Make him 12 and no boy over 13 will touch your book with a ten foot disinfected bargepole. Marcus and his antics will be considered 'lame', 'sad' or whatever the current phrase is by the time you read this. **So decide on your market first – then create the lead character.** I hope this is obvious. Few boys will want to read a book called "Molly's Naughty Pony" so if you write that book, your market is young girls. If Molly is 10, your readership is age 8-10 and probably not a month older! No 'young woman' of 11 (!) wants to read about 'little girls' like Molly – age 10.

Okay, that said, let's continue looking at character.

Marcus is obviously **brave,** and therefore easy for readers to identify with. His decision to go and find his brother is also the sort of thing most young boys would think of doing. But it is so far still only a story of an adventurous journey with some excitement thrown in.

By the time Marcus and his companions have survived a wetting and a clash with tribesmen, we're half-way through the book and we need something to give some **urgency and tension** to the rest of the journey. This cannot be a mere succession of dangerous moments, no matter how well crafted.

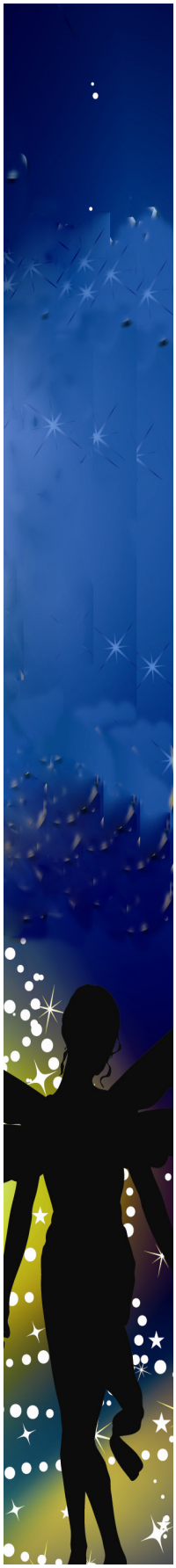
So the story still needs **more obstacles and conflict** in order to make it a page-turner with a great hero at the centre.

Here are some ideas:

- After the battle, our travellers stop for the night near a village. There are other travellers at the tavern, talking about Boudicca and her campaign against the Romans - and a rumour that she is planning to sacrifice her captives to her gods at the forthcoming equinox.
- News could come (how?) that his brother has already been sacrificed. This is, of course a mistake for some reason or other.
- Someone offers to lead Marcus to his brother. But it's a trap. (Why?)

Now Marcus has a burning urgency to complete his journey and rescue his brother.

Anything that delays him will serve as a tension builder, so **here are some delay ideas:**



- Horses go lame.
- Horses are stolen.
- Marcus is badly injured.
- Stops to help someone – who eventually returns the favour?

The closer we get to the climax, the greater the significance of any delay.

Planning the Timing of a Story

If you carry out this level of planning a story early on it tends to dictate timing, amongst many other things. By timing, I mean the order in which things happen and how long a time elapses for each incident.

For instance, the likeliest time for a spectacular sacrifice to the gods of the Iceni is the autumn equinox (October 21st to us) when bonfires are lit. There are Roman reports of Druid festivals that involved human sacrifices by fire, so this idea has authenticity.

It means that Marcus has to leave South Wales some time in late August or early September, and make an autumn journey.

So you can see the importance of planning in some detail.

TIP: It is almost impossible to write a convincing and publishable story without this level of detailed planning.

By the way, having a carefully crafted and detailed plan makes the actual writing of the story far, far easier. It would be a lie to say it writes itself, but it sure does help!

Looking briefly at the other two story-lines:

John could change schools at any stage in the year, so unless his talent is for a seasonal sport, it probably doesn't matter too much when this story happens.

Susan and Mary's story will have to be in early summer, as this is the time when scholarship exams take place. A real newbie mistake would be to set this in the Winter or Autumn.

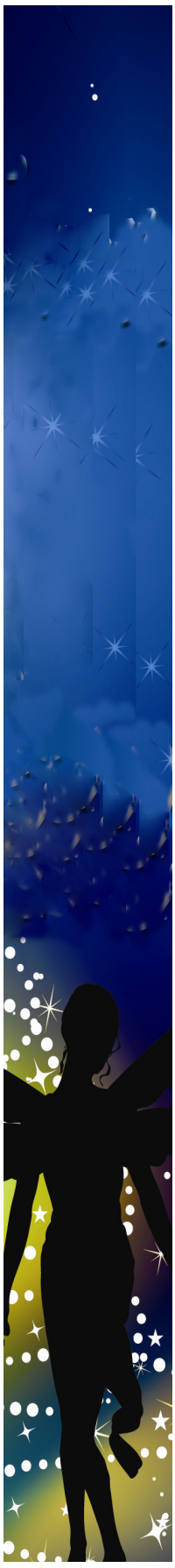
Let us now take a look at the second element of the craft:

Setting

Along with **characterisation** and **plot**, the **setting** of a story is one of the three major elements of a satisfying piece of fiction. There are also three elements to settings, all of which must be described vividly for your readers.

They are:-

- Exteriors - the outside world.



- Interiors - rooms and houses.
- The psychological and social aspects of the environment. For example, the emotional 'tone' of a setting.

Hot Insider Tip…

Editors say that the commonest problem with manuscripts from new authors, and the one that causes most rejections, is that the background to the story is inadequate.

The most common mistake that causes this problem:

- When writers set their stories where they have lived for a long time.

It is as though familiarity has led to their ignoring their surroundings. Such writers may be able to cope with living in a sterile world, but fiction has to excite the reader.

How to avoid making this mistake:

- **Detailed description** makes certain you avoid falling into what I personally call the monochrome state of writing.

If you suspect you are slipping into this trap, do the exercise of looking at your environment as though it were the first time you were seeing it. Remember, **for your readers it will be**. So use all of the senses, not just what you can see. Your readers' will want to know how the place, looks, feels, smells, tastes and what you can hear. So use all the senses, don't merely describe what you can see.

If the setting in your story has a brewery or tannery, don't forget to tell your readers about the smell. If you want to include a motorbike pulling out of a turning, it may be important to describe how it looks and the sound it makes.

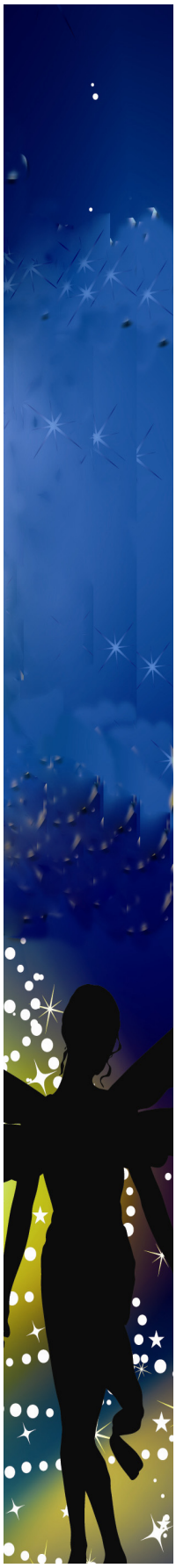
Important Tips…

- Detailed description never means including everything you can think of. Most writers, including myself, write loads of impressions and notes down but end up using a fraction of those.
- Pick out only what you know to be important to the telling of the story.
- If you can find unusual ways to describe a setting, it helps to make your story unique and more interesting for readers.

Get into the habit of noticing both colour and texture, and comparing them with other things.

For example:

- What are the buildings made of? Stone, brick, or wood?
- What colour are the bricks?
- Are the bricks rough or smooth? Smooth as ... what? Tile, marble, the



kitchen work-surface?

Here's are examples of using the senses for detailed description:

- **Sight** - What colour are cabbages? Not just green: Spring cabbages are called Ox Heart for their shape and they are pale silvery green, Savoy Winter cabbages are dark blue-green with purple tinges and bubbly leaves. If you look at them with the sun behind them, you will see a delicate tracery of white ribs through the leaves. Red cabbages have a smooth ball of tight inner leaves in the centre, with outer leaves that are deep purple-red with a silver bloom on them.
- **Sound** – What sound does a cabbage make? If you think it doesn't, buy a cabbage and listen to the squeak as you cut it, and wonder what else might squeak like that. (and no, don't you *dare* say 'a mouse'!)
- **Smell** - Cook a cabbage and smell it again as the steam fills the kitchen and creeps up the stairs if you are foolish enough to leave the door open, as the sloppy mum of one of your character's might do.
- **Taste** – What does raw cabbage taste like? (Surprisingly nice, actually).What does a cooked cabbage taste like? And if you mix those tastes with other foods, what happens to your taste buds?

Exterior Settings

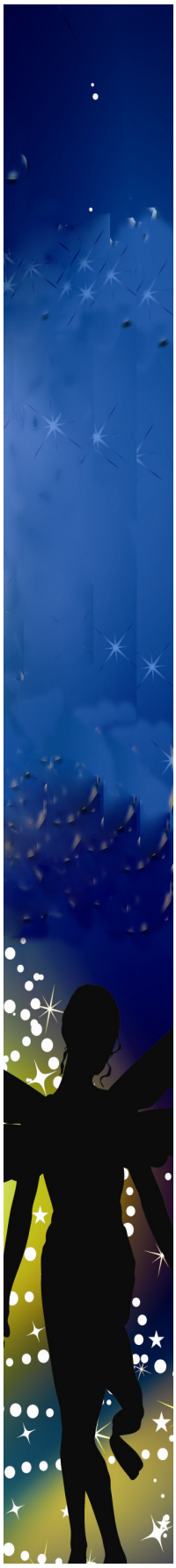
The world outside is only one of the three elements of setting, although it is often the most important.

More techniques to create detailed setting:

- Walk or drive your setting if it's a long journey, noticing everything as your character might do. Even if your story is set in history, walk or drive over the ground. Towns and fields will have changed, but the lie of the land will be approximately the same. The extent of the change will depend on how far back your story is set.

For instance, the Malvern Hills haven't changed since the Romans were here, but the coast-line has, especially around East Anglia.

- If you intend to feature a place at any time in history, take the trouble to go to its local library or museum and ask for help. If you tell them why you need to know, they will be delighted to help and will tell you many things you hadn't even realised you needed to know, as well as show you old maps and drawings.
- Remember, when looking about you for impressions of your surroundings, that your readers will be younger than you. Unless you are writing for teenagers, that means they will be shorter than you, so their eye level is lower than yours. You may be able to see over a fence into a garden, but a child will only see the boards until he gets to the end of the fence. While you are admiring the flowers, he is thinking what a splendid noise he could make if he had a stick to run along the fence.



Interior Settings

The second aspect is the interior world. Unless your main characters go into many buildings you only describe their homes once, twice at most if they go into different rooms. Even in the multi-interior scenario, be careful not to overdo it.

All settings exterior and interior must be described **as they have an impact on your characters**.

Some examples:

- A poor child could be expected to notice a rich home, comparing it with his own and vice versa, but other than that only describe in detail what has a bearing on the movement of the story.
- The average boy wouldn't notice the colour of carpets, but he would comment to his friends that he has to leave his shoes in the kitchen now Mum has got new pink carpets in the lounge.
- Any child would comment on a sofa if they were told to stop kicking the base because it marked the leather, or feel guilty if he spilt hot chocolate on the sofa and couldn't wipe it off because the fabric was rough tweed.

Relationship between Characters and Setting

The third element of setting is the details of the intimate cultural background, together with the wider social mores of the time and place in which your characters live.

Interaction between children and their parents is important because it sets the emotional atmosphere of the family. A secure, well loved child (character) won't be upset by gentle nagging about the furniture or the state of his bedroom (setting). However, a sensitive child will hate the thought of bringing friends home to a house that always smells of over-cooked cabbage.

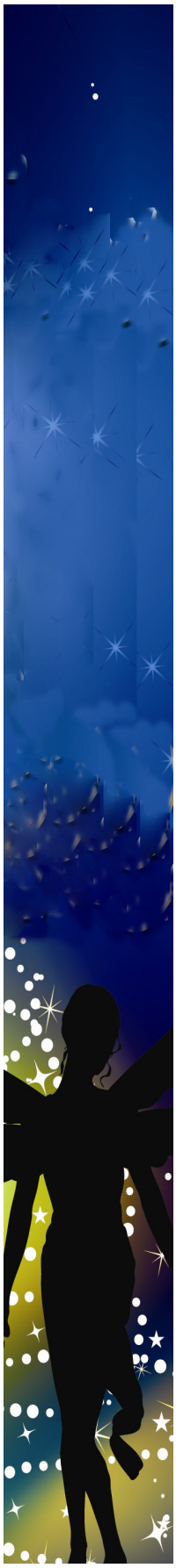
It is events like these that help to form a child's character and shape their behaviour, and for this reason they are important for more than background colour. This technique adds both richness and authenticity to your story.

Description - Direct and Indirect

One of the subtleties of writing for different age groups is to determine to what extent you describe directly, or hint at obliquely, the various elements of setting.

Here are the guidelines:

Younger readers demand **direct descriptions**.



Example:

"Tony looked at the snow. Great huge dollops of the stuff were dropping from the sky forming a thick, white carpet on the ground.

He scrambled for his Wellingtons. His were to be the first footsteps on that white landscape."

Teenage readers can cope with **indirect descriptions**:

Example:

"The grey, pillowed sky appeared to sigh and gratefully shed its load of downy feathers upon the sleeping earth below. It was crystal-still. Silence in white."

Notice that in the above example, the word 'snow' is not even mentioned!

Younger readers demand **explicit emotional 'tone'**:

Example:

"Joe hated his Uncle Harry's house. It was there, in that cold front room, that he had been told about the death of his faithful dog, Rex."

Teenage readers (and adults of course) can handle **inexplicit emotional tone**:

Example:

"The room exuded a bone-dead coldness. Coldness and fear tinged with sorrow at a loss half-remembered. The ticking Grandfather clock seemed to mark out the span of his young life and count down the time before the darkness came again."

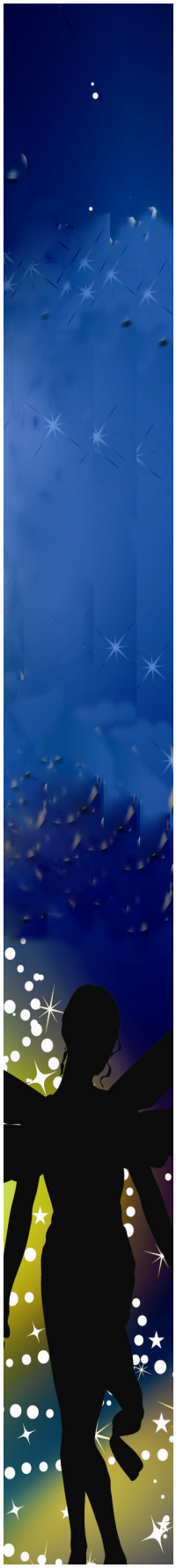
Viewpoint

This is the third element in producing a successful story - and a very important one. The main question for every story you write is:

- Who is going to be telling your story?

Obviously, you are, but whose eyes and voice will you be using? Here are your choices:

- 'First person' (I awoke to see a large crow tapping its beak against my bedroom window.")
- 'Third person' (Marcus awoke to see a large crow tapping its beak against his bedroom window.")



If you write a story in the '**first person' you write as if you are the character.**

Example:

"I woke up late and looked out of the window. I could see Jock sitting on the lawn gnawing a bone."

If you write a story in the '**third person' you write as an observer of all the characters.**

Example:

"Tony woke late and looked out of the window. He saw Jock sitting on the law gnawing a bone."

Golden Insider Tip…

Whichever you choose, having made your choice **you must continue with it,** for there are few crimes worse in editors' eyes than switching viewpoints during a story. Changing viewpoint during a story is the quickest way to mark out the novice writer.

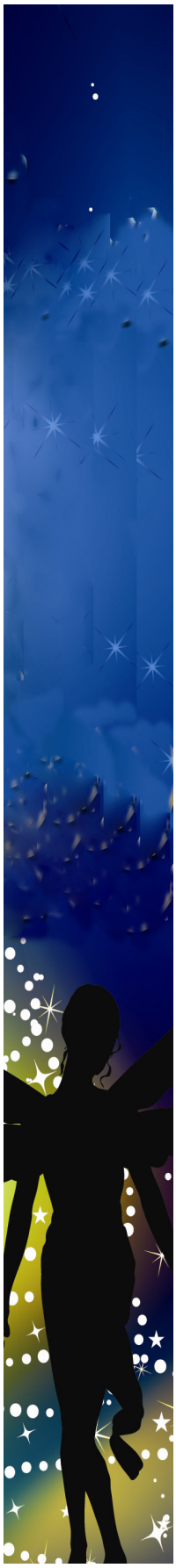
It is irritating enough when encountered in adult fiction (some writers think it's clever); children (and adults) **instinctively hate it** and will reject books that attempt it.

This is because it causes a break in concentration, a realisation that the story you were immersed in is something that you are reading, rather than watching as though it were real life.

New writers tend to opt for the first person viewpoint, telling the story 'as it happened to them.' This seems the easiest way to go about it, but it does have some big snags.

The most important and limiting difficulty with using first person, is this: Whether you choose to be the main character, or a subsidiary character telling the story, you can only describe **what you saw, what you heard, and what you thought**. You cannot know anything else which happens 'off stage') unless you were told about it, and you must report it in those terms. This sets you apart from the action if you are not the main character, and it is important for children to be able to immerse themselves in the action.

(Aside: Try reading ***Frankenstein*** and see the ludicrous lengths the author must go to so that her character can know about stuff which is happening back home. This story would have been far better written in the third person in my view.)



For example:

“Dan told me how he drew his sword and with a single stroke, severed the Tensor's head from its body.”

Contrast this with the more immediate:

“I drew my sword and, with a single stroke, severed the Tensor's head from its body.”

So for children's stories told in the first person, it is best if you are the main character.

To achieve strong writing that works in the first person, you need to ask two vital questions.

They are:

- Why are you telling this story?
- And how?

Be careful how you answer this. The “My teacher said I should write it down,” explanation has become a tired cliché, as has “Dear Diary...”

The best solution is not to explain, just start: “When I lived in Gloucester...”

The major advantage of using the first person is that it gives you **full intimacy** with the main character, and his or her deepest thoughts and emotions. This, carefully handled, makes for a high level of reader identification.

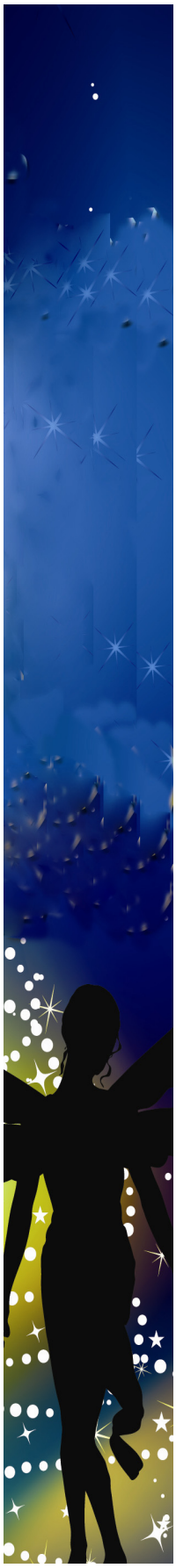
But you have to describe yourself without appearing to be big-headed or too introverted.

If you wrote, “My hair is silken blonde, my eyes are blue and I am very beautiful,” your heroine is introduced as a vain brat who is asking to be slapped down! No reader will want to identify with her.

However, if you wrote, “She was a pretty, blue-eyed, blonde girl,” it makes the heroine much more likeable. So you can write things in the third person that don’t work in the first person. Of course you can gt across the same thing in the first person, but you need to use a ‘device’ such as:

Mother stroked my hair soothingly. “Such pretty blonde hair,” she said. “Your grandmother had beautiful long hair like this. Her friends called her Goldilocks for fun, you know, when they wanted to tease her…”

That tells the reader the main character has beautiful blonde hair, without it coming across as vanity.



Using the third person allows you to know more about all the characters, and to be **dispassionate** about the main character. So, as an observer, you can say your hero was brave or your heroine pretty, where these descriptions of oneself in the first person as you know can sound conceited.

However, when using the third person, you should still relate the whole story from the main character's point of view. This is essential in children's stories, because of the ever present need for **identification**. So you can't use any of the devices used in adult fiction, such as breaking up chapters into sections about the different characters who will eventually come together at the end.

(Aside: Even as an adult, don't you groan inwardly when chapter one is all about the main character, then chapter two starts off with someone entirely different and never mentions the main character?)

Adult readers can accept this level of sophisticated narrative technique; children see it as an unnecessary and highly confusing change of viewpoint.

Past, Present and Future Tense

The next decision on viewpoint is where you, as the narrator are standing in time. In other words, what *tense* are you going to use?

The best place to start is at the beginning and move logically through the events as they occurred. **The devices of hindsight or flashbacks are too sophisticated for children, and are another of the jolts that bring them back to the real world.**

So here's an example that is not too sophisticated:
"John wished he was back in his old class at Oakley Road, with his friends around him."

Here's that example made too sophisticated:
End one paragraph with "John backed up against the wall and stared defiantly at Steve and Andy," then start a new paragraph with a flashback description of the classroom at Oakley Road, full of other children who haven't been mentioned before.

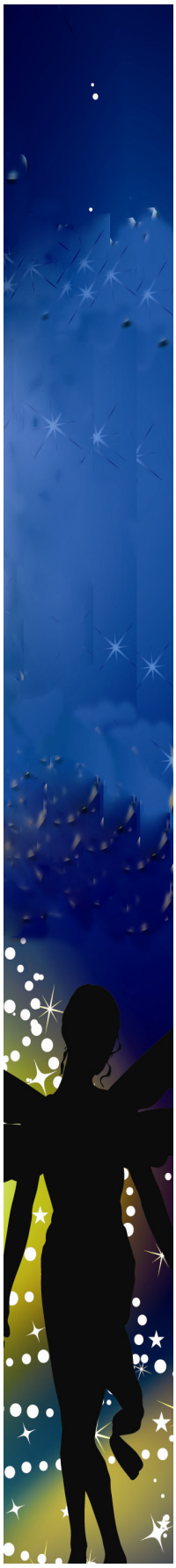
The readers would wonder what they had missed, and start turning back the pages to see what is happening.

Voices

The final decision you have to make on viewpoint is the 'voice' you will use. **Voice sets the mood and says a lot about the main character as well.**

Voice doesn't mean dialogue, but the **tone** in which the story is told. **Here are some choices of tones:**

- Matter-of-fact



- Melodramatic
- Heroic
- Lyrical

You choose whatever is appropriate for the story. As with viewpoint, it must remain the same all the way through.

For example, **Marcus is unlikely to be a day-dreamer or poet**, if he is brave enough to set out to cross a land full of warring tribesmen. He will view the country he goes through in a **matter-of-fact but wary way**, knowing that a big tree could conceal an enemy. He will probably not wax lyrical about its strange unearthly beauty.

This doesn't mean you ignore his emotions, or dismiss them in a single sentence.

Here's an example of too bald a statement for Marcus' emotions:
"No-one likes to hear of a brother in the hands of the enemy, and Marcus was no exception."

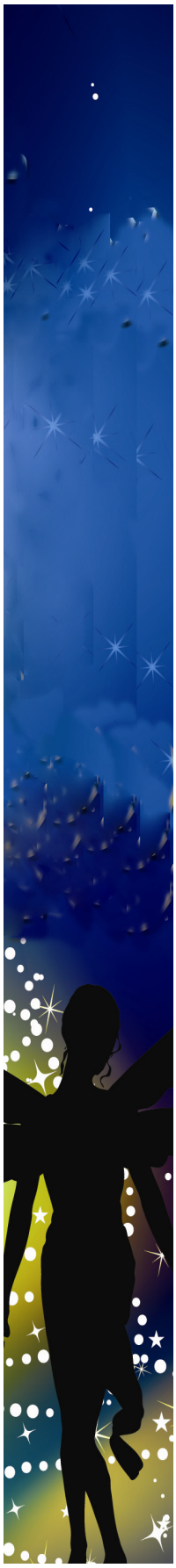
Here's an example which gives the reader Marcus' emotions:
"Marcus was stunned by the news. Flavius, captured? How could it be true? His big brother, brave Flavius, the best horseman in the Legion?
Flavius, who had taught him to ride? Just thinking of that first lesson brought back the feel of the pony underneath him, the warm muscles rippling beneath his legs and the rough hair of the mane as he clutched at it to steady himself. Flavius, who had laughed and punched him on the arm when he fell. Flavius, who was now under threat of death..."

Susan, on the other hand, is going to remember things in a very different way.

We already know she cares deeply for her music, and she is likely to see everything around her in a more **lyrical way**.

Here's an example which gives the reader Susan's emotions:
"Susan remembered the first lesson she had with Mr Stanislow. She had been struck by the sensitivity in his long bony fingers as he almost stroked the haunting tune from his violin. He had been so patient with her clumsy attempts to copy his perfect timing. She thought it would take her whole lifetime to equal his delicate fingering. Just as she felt she was improving a little, her hour was up and she had to go, out of his tiny room, down the narrow stairs out into the street to the bus-stop.

As she waited for the bus, she heard the haunting tune again, wafting out of the open window and filtering down through the dancing leaves of the giant beech tree that stood in his front garden."



In our ‘Susan’ story, we have two very different girls. So they would obviously react very differently to the news that their boyfriend has been seen with another girl.

Example of Susan’s reaction to this event told in her lyrical voice:
“It was the saddest thing that has ever happened to me. I had to creep away to be sick and then pretend I'd eaten something that didn't agree with me. I knew it would be no good trying to tell them how I felt, they just don't understand.”

Example of Mary’s reaction to this event told in her matter-of-fact voice:
“It made me feel pretty sick, I can tell you. Still, there wasn't a lot of point in making a fuss about it they'd have only said I was being silly.”

Those are just a few examples of the **voice** you might use. Don't go too far away from your own personality, though, or you will find it difficult to sustain.

(Aside: We can’t get through a lesson without mentioning political correctness and so on. Try not to let this influence you too much. If it sounds ‘sexist’ that a book for girls will have a stronger emphasis on their inner emotional landscape than an adventure yarn for boys, it’s for a reason. This is how the world is! You cane rail against it, you can wish it were not so, you can fight and scream and kick but please, whatever you do, **don’t waste your life trying to write a book which attempts to reverse this state of affairs.** Your readership will be vanishingly small for books which feature boys crying over dead ponies and engaging in bitchy tittle-tattle with the other lads at school, maybe breaking off to discuss a little celebrity gossip or swap make-up tips. Your readership will be similarly non-existent for a young teenage girl’s swashbuckling adventure yarn where she fights pirates, wrestles a demon to the ground, before doing ten push-ups, Lara Croft notwithstanding. If it really IS your life mission to reverse one million years of cultural evolution, then try this book when you have ten best sellers under your belt – not .)

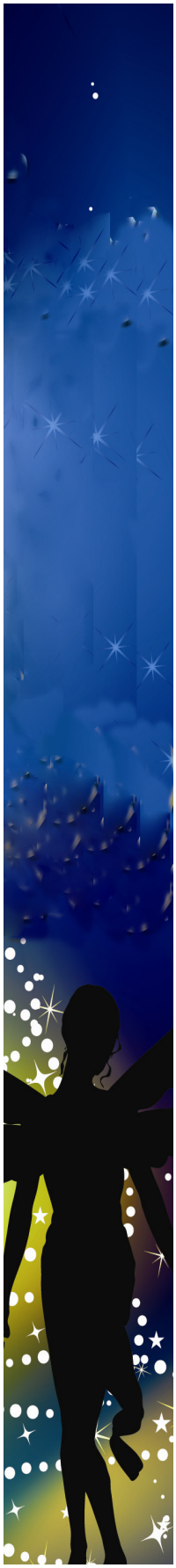
The First Chapter

Where to begin? This is the problem that faces every writer, with every story. Given that I have already explained that **flashbacks** are not appropriate in children's stories there is only one place to begin and that is at the beginning.

But where is the beginning? How much scene-setting should you do before you get to the incident that triggers the problems your characters have to overcome? The answer is as little as possible.

You want to hook your readers almost immediately – if you can do it with the first sentence, so much the better.

Unless you are writing for the teenage girls' market, and want to establish a strong character who will hook the reader's sympathy, you really need some action on the first page. Nothing major, necessarily, but enough to let the



readers know that something life-changing (conflict) is going to happen, and to indicate the main character's qualities.

Insider Tip…

New writers often start their story too far back. (Once upon a time the earth was in a molten state. Eventually the crust cooled and… ☺)

Here are some examples of what NOT to do:

- Don't show Susan finishing her day at school and chatting to her friends on the bus, walking to her house and stopping to pat the dog before she goes indoors.
- Don't go into a long exposition abut how the Legions came to be based at Isca, how many men were there, why Marcus is there and who his family are.

Way before all this routine guff has ended the readers have got bored and given up. You have to get their attention straight away or you'll lose them, particularly in these days on Internet surfing and TV channel hopping. The average child has the attention span of a hamster.)

We really aren't concerned with the details of Susan's school day, or her journey home. We want to know **what is going to happen to her**. So start by showing her putting her key in the door, dropping her bag in the hall and seeing the envelope marked '**Brighthampton Music College**' on the hall table and her mother looking anxious.

Similarly, on the first page, Marcus will have been outside the tavern near his home and heard someone shout, "The Ninth is finished! The one's that weren't slaughtered were captured." And he would rush home, heart beating to be greeted with, "I'm afraid we've had bad news, Marcus."

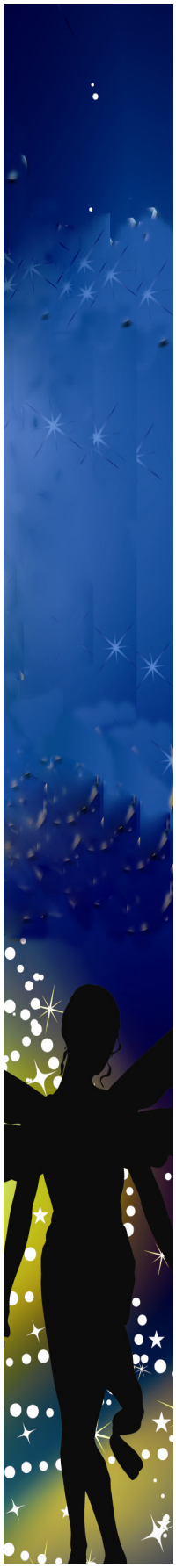
Either of these beginnings will keep the pages turning.

The best beginnings are those which involve a **change** in the life of your main character (conflict). John's, Susan's and Marcus' story have this theme, and they all need to start with the introduction of the change to come. Journeys are always a good way to initiate change, or the arrival of strangers or a letter.

Susan's letter is just the right way to start a story about someone whose interests are cerebral. For Marcus, who is a young man of action it is better that the news is delivered by the more direct method of a messenger, even if it is inadvertently.

Setting the Tone

The beginning of your story has to **set the tone** of the whole story, with character insights for stories of emotional upheaval and action for stories of



adventure.

The action start of an adventure story needs to be a small and fairly personal action. Your readers want to know whose side they are meant to be on, and if you start in the middle of a major battle they won't know which side is which. Throughout the story, the climaxes should come more frequently, with each being of greater intensity than the previous. This is called 'climbing the stairs'.

All good 'works of art' have this inherent, gradual building of climax. Great musical symphonies will start with a small crescendo and gradually work up to larger and larger climaxes. Good theatre will do the same, until you are on the edge of your seat by the closing moments. The same is true of a good film.

So don't throw away all of your good ideas in the opening pages or chapters. **Space the ideas out from start to finish, saving the biggest and most exciting for last.** This will keep the pages turning, and the reader interested. This, after all, is the end result you want. The more people who are excited about your story the more copies you will sell – and that could be worldwide!

The First Draft

Don't be tempted to believe that your work will come out perfectly the first time. Even experienced best-selling authors expect to revise and polish their books at least once and usually many times, and as a beginner you will have to do the same.

Top Insider Tip…

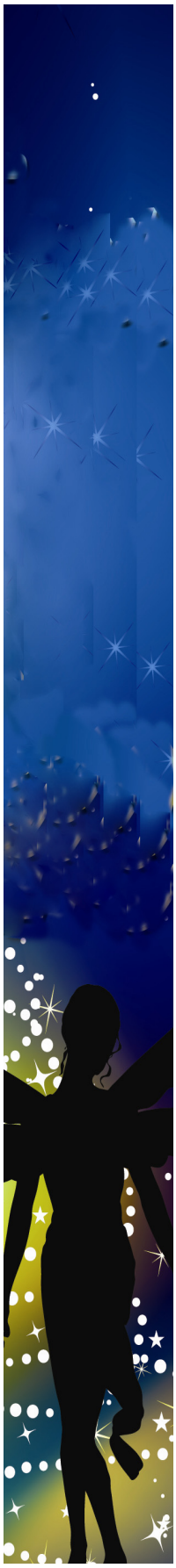
Don’t attempt to write perfect prose in your first draft. What is important is that you get the whole story down on paper as spontaneously and urgently as you can.

Don't worry whether you are using words that will be outside your readers' vocabularies, or whether your sentences are too long. All of this can be dealt with during revision.

You should not let the inevitable gaps in your research (or even the need to find the right word when it hides on the tip of your tongue) slow you down. Just put in a question mark, or a note to yourself [in square brackets or coloured font to make it easier to find later] and press on. Use square brackets [] to indicate notes to yourself. [This is a note to myself.]

Don't let yourself be distracted by the outside world when you should be immersed in your own created world.

Having done a first draft, the bulk of the creative work is complete. Now it is a question of rewriting and honing the rough stone into a polished gem.



This is the time to labour over individual words and sentences in your search for exactly the right word or phrase. This stage can take quite a long time, depending on how much of a perfectionist you are. Typically it will take 3-4 times longer than it took to write the first draft.

Common Mistakes

The Butterfly Syndrome

Some new writers, having had their first story back in the post with a rejection slip, put it away and start on another story. Then, when the second story is rejected, they put that away and start on a third. Some spend years doing this, writing story after story, sending each one out once only, before adding it to the pile.

There are two reasons to avoid doing this:

- The first is that it is a total waste of the time and emotional energy that it took to write each story.
- The second is that it doesn't teach you anything.

Unless you are the sort of writer who refuses to rewrite anything once it has flowed from your brilliant pen (and there are, surprise, surprise, a lot of *unpublished* writers who adopt this attitude) you have to accept that your work has been rejected because there is a problem with it. And often there are a lot of problems… AND they are great big fat problems, not teensy little nit-picking quibbles.

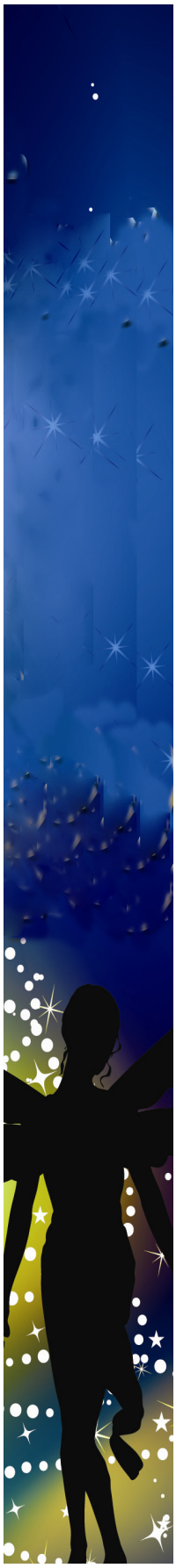
A problem with your story does not mean that the whole thing is useless.

If you just put it away and start on something else, you are likely to repeat the error; whereas looking at it analytically after some time has elapsed should enable you to isolate the problem and put it right.

Even sillier is to flit from one type of writing to another. If you were to write, say, a school story, and when it came back, you decided it really was too bad to polish, your next piece of work should be another school story, not a piece of science fiction.

The same applies when you do have a book accepted. Your publishers, and your readers, will want more of the same, not something completely different. Each genre has its own conventions and styles, and it takes time to absorb them fully. If you flit from one to another, you will master none of them, so **give yourself time to learn your craft on one genre before deciding you need a change of direction.**

That's it for now. I hope you have enjoyed this lesson and it has stimulated your mind into coming up with some great ideas.
All it takes is:



ONE great idea
TWO pinches of imagination
and
THREE spoonfuls of effort
To SERVE UP a Page-turning book that reaches the top of the charts in the 'Children's Best Seller List!'

Enjoy your writing until we link up again.

Scott Thornton