How to Become a Millionaire Children's Author

LESSON TWELVE

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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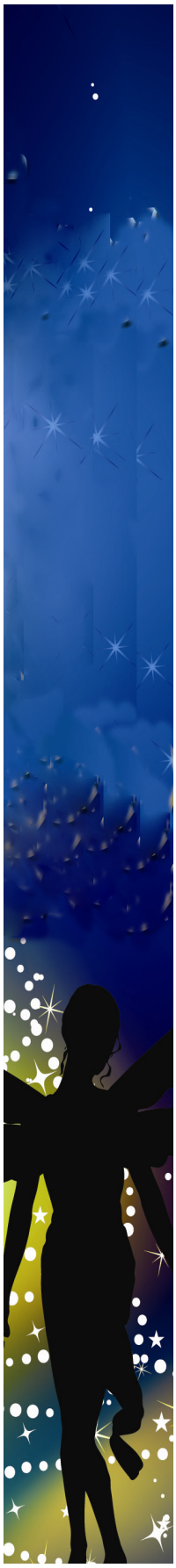


Welcome and a huge ‘Thank You’ for purchasing the final lesson of the twelve part course, ‘How to Become a Millionaire Children’s Author’.

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

Writing for Other Media

The main market place for your writing is in book form, and most people who want to write can 'see' themselves as a writer of books, with copies of their own books on their shelves.

This is probably what attracted you to this course in the first place. However, you should not overlook other media that also need material.

Any published work adds an aura of respectability to your career and makes the acceptance of your major work more likely.

Let us take a look at some of the other outlets for your writing.

Drama

There are three main types of drama:

- Stage plays.
- Radio plays.
- TV plays – otherwise known as screenplays.

Each has its own special problems. We'll look at each in turn, before considering the basic techniques of writing drama.

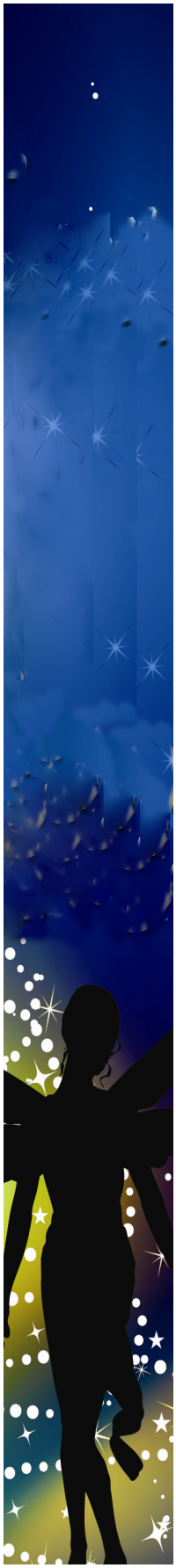
Plays to be Performed on the Stage, or 'Live' Theatre

Plays fall into two categories:

- Plays to be performed by children in an amateur situation such as school or a youth theatre festival.
- Plays where the audience will be predominantly children or teenagers but the performers will be a **professional** theatre company.

Plays written for young amateur performers will need to be quite short. You cannot expect young amateurs to be able to sustain their performance for the one and a half to two hours normally required for an adult performance.

Also, you cannot expect the children playing the main characters to remember a vast quantity of lines, as you can a professional actor, so 30 to 45 minutes is the usual length. If you are writing a play for a specific youth theatre festival, check the required length before you start writing. Often they have strict time limits (e.g. thirty minutes) and the adjudicators might disqualify the play if it



exceeds this time.

Since the main niche for these plays is for performance by junior school children, aged eight to eleven, create your characters mainly in this age band. You should set the level of plot and language in plays for young performers, according to the age of those performers.

The length of speeches for any individual character should correspond with their age:

- Young characters, short speeches.
- Older character, longer speeches.

This is in line with real life, anyway, as young children tend to speak in short sound bites. For the youngest characters keep the lines to no more than one sentence.

Financial Rewards

Although this is a market that is constantly in need of material, the financial rewards are very small. Most schools operate on such a tight budget that they cannot afford to pay playwrights. Several educational publishers will consider plays, but what they want at any given time will depend upon the current drama teaching curriculum.

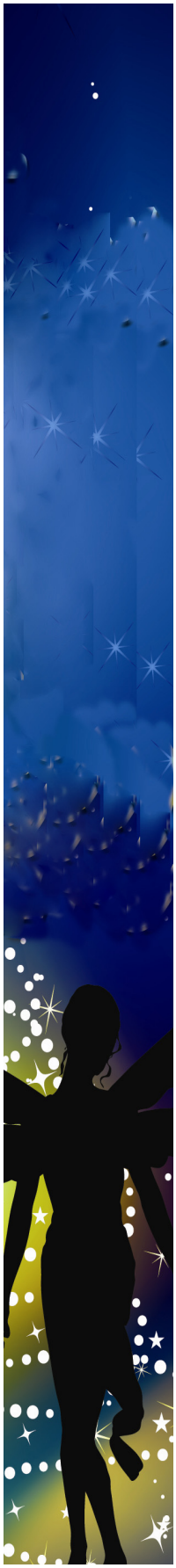
Professional Theatre

Professional theatre companies rarely include child actors and will **prefer plays that do not include children in the cast.**

Producers can hire professional child actors, if essential, but the complications of complying with the regulations governing their hours and conditions of work are an additional hassle that the producer will not relish. It could be the single factor that will cause her to reject your play.

To get your play performed by a professional company, write a letter to the company with an outline of your story and ask if they would like to see the whole script. Either choose a local theatre that has a record of producing plays for children, or try The Unicorn Theatre for Children or the Polka Children's Theatre (in Wimbledon).

Their addresses are in the Writers and Artists Yearbook. Alternatively, you might consider joining the National Association of Youth Theatres (Unit 1304, The Custard Factory, Digbeth, Birmingham B9 4AA http://www.nayt.org.uk) or London Drama (Holborn Centre for the Performing Arts, Three Cups Yard, Sandland Street, London WC1R 4PZ, http://www.londondrama.org/), both of which will supply information on theatres that produce plays for children.



Agents and Fees

When your first play is accepted, before signing the contract, you should get yourself an agent. Rights for drama are complex and you will need professional advice.

You will receive a performance fee based on a percentage of the box office receipts, but this will still be **considerably less than you would receive for putting the same amount of effort into writing a book.** However, having had your plays performed by professionals will make it easier to get your foot in the door of the far more lucrative TV and radio markets. It is also great fun to see one of your plays being performed, and a tremendous ego boost!

The best training for writing plays is to **join an amateur dramatic society.** You don't have to act if you don't want to (although this is preferable), but there is no substitute for having been involved at the sharp end of the theatre to learn what will and won't work on the stage. No matter how avid a theatre-goer you are, you need to try life on the other side of the footlights for a while.

Dialogue

The main consideration is the need to produce **lines of dialogue that actors can speak without stumbling.** It is easy to write a tongue-twister without realising it, and for this reason you should restrict your use of sibilants as well as the range of sounds which lispers find difficult, such as too many r's and w's, or b's and d's, in close proximity.

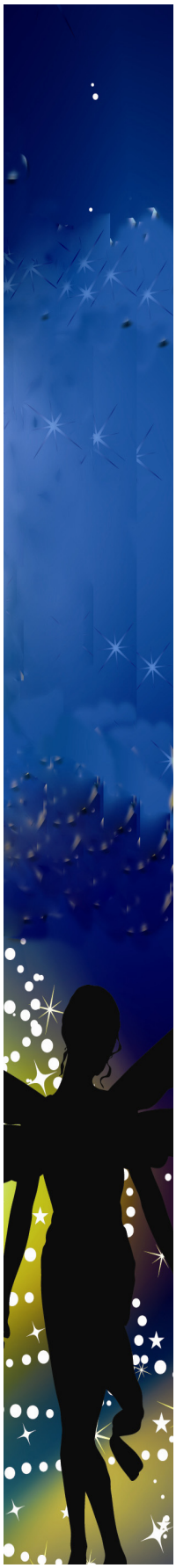
You should, as a matter of course, read all your lines out loud to check them for 'sayability' before you commit them irrevocably to paper.

Another consideration when writing plays for the live theatre is that you cannot, as you can in a book, go into what a character is thinking. You must tell everything through dialogue. In a radio play you can let the character 'talk' to himself with a marked change of tone of speech, and on television you can provide a flashback scene, but neither of these ploys will work on the stage.

You can give a general direction: 'Marcus is feeling sad' and any competent actor will assume not only a sad expression but also the posture of sadness. But you cannot give a direction that says 'Marcus is feeling sad as he remembers when his brother taught him to ride'. If that information is vital to the audience's comprehension, you will have to bring it out in a speech, thus:

ANTONIUS: Why do you look so sad, Marcus? Is it the news of your brother?

MARCUS: Yes. I was remembering how good he was to me when I was young. Do you know, Antonius, he taught me to ride when I was only eight?



Pace and Action

Although plays mainly consist of dialogue, for a young audience you must also provide plenty of physical action.

Too many over-long sequences of speech, with an audience full of eight or nine year old boys, will result in a near riot as they get bored and start prodding each other and throwing things.

Before writing your first play, you must spend many long hours watching pantomime and other plays for children. You will notice the noise level rising dramatically as soon as the on-stage action becomes boring. You will learn many valuable lessons from attending such plays. It will prove to you that your writing must have plenty of pace and action.

You also need to know just what action is *possible,* from the performers themselves and from the constraints of a stage and scenery. If you call for anything violent in the way of a fight or a capture, it is wise to set it in a location that is not full of furniture.

If children are to perform the play, such scenes are not a good idea at all. Professional actors are trained to scuffle convincingly and fall without hurting themselves; certain children will inevitably overdo things and damage themselves and others.

Insider Secret…

A common mistake made by beginners is to assume that too much is possible on stage.

This stems from complete ignorance of stage techniques, and this is why it is important to get some 'hands on' experience. This ignorance is highlighted by the famous amateur stage direction:

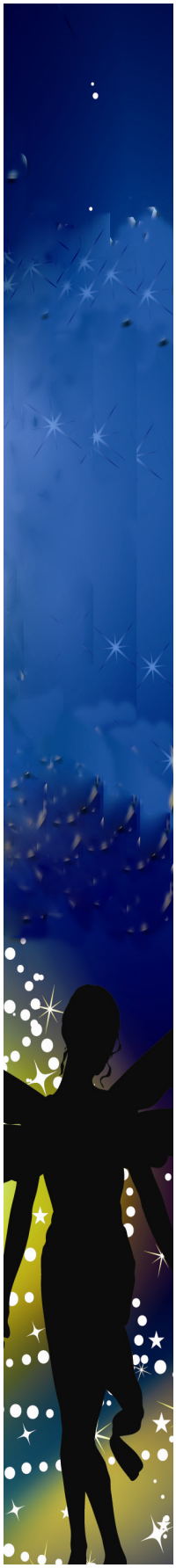
'Enter Hanibal leading six elephants. The woodland is ablaze and six horse-riders circle the flames attempting to beat them out.'

Plays for Radio

Writing drama for radio means, in practical terms, writing for the BBC, as there is virtually no other market for radio drama. The good news is that the BBC has a policy of actively encouraging new writers.

Log onto the BBC website (www.bbc.co.uk) and they have masses of news and information for writers, including fairly regular writing competitions that you can enter. There's not much point in my telling you very specific information on this, because policies are always changing.

For instance, last time I researched this, the market for children's radio plays



was quite small. The current BBC wisdom stated that children want fast action television with wall to wall noise, action, subtitles, inset framed videos and scrolling text across the bottom.

However, do remember that the BBC is not the only outlet for writers. If you want to research all the outlets for your writing, just spend a few hours surfing the net and you will glean all the most up-to-date information that's out there. And that's not just for radio writing, but all areas.

There are advantages and disadvantages in writing for radio, both associated with the fact that the actors and locations are invisible.

The first disadvantage is that you can only demonstrate the **emotional state** of the characters by:

- Tone and speed of speech.
- Or by spoken clues.

Tone and speed of delivery can only go so far in a one-off play, when the listeners are not familiar with the characters, so you normally have to go through the 'Why are you looking so sad?' routine, accompanied by much sighing.

The second disadvantage is that the only way you can let the listeners know about the **location** is with sound effects and more dialogue; whereas on stage or screen it is obvious that the location for the action is a field or railway station.

Your part in this can only consist of a general direction: 'The action takes place in Victoria Station in the rush hour', and leave it to the sound experts to provide the necessary noises, unless something specific, like a barking dog, is essential to the plot.

Also, you can only use 'props' if the listener can hear them, or if you refer to them in dialogue.

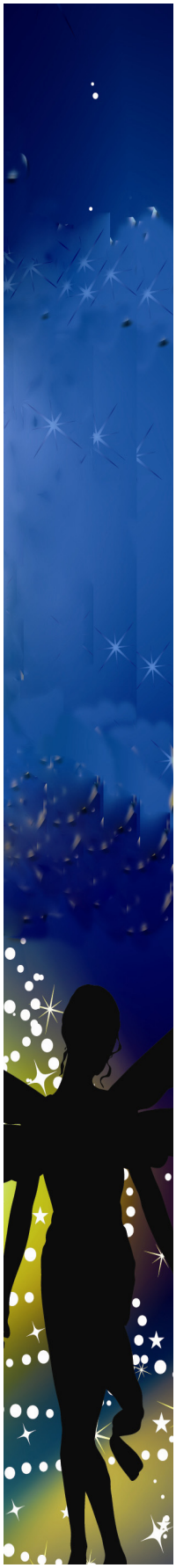
ANTONIUS: "What are you doing with that horse-shoe?"

MARCUS: "My brother gave it to me for luck."

Production Costs and You, the Writer

On the other hand, the fact that the audience can't see the location can be a positive advantage. It costs no more to provide sound effects for the Victoria Falls than for Victoria Station, whereas providing a waterfall in a theatre or transporting cast and cameras to Africa are both logistically complicated and expensive.

The other advantage with radio is that a talented actor or actress can play



several characters in the same play by merely changing voices, where you would normally need a separate actor for each part if they can be seen.

As a writer, the actual logistics of this aren't your concern, but it does make a considerable difference to the **cost of the production,** so when writing for radio you can use more characters than you might for a visual production.

But, perhaps most important of all is that new writers are more likely to be succeed with selling a radio play than a TV drama – simply because the production costs *are* lower.

Payment for the use of certain pieces of music also adds to the costs of production. Unless it is absolutely essential to your plot that a character is listening to a particular piece of music being played by a particular band, it is better to give a general direction like 'Tony is listening to a brass band' and leave the producer to choose a piece with a lower licensing fee.

Drama for Television

Although from the remuneration point of view, writing for TV is the most lucrative of all the writing media, it is also the most difficult to break into. TV producers are extremely hard-nosed, and they generally do not bother themselves with amateur playwrights. They prefer to commission experienced writers to adapt children's books into drama, and they **certainly do not want to read unsolicited scripts from beginners.**

However, if you have already had your plays performed on the professional stage, or on radio, they will consider that you are closer to being a professional and pay you more attention.

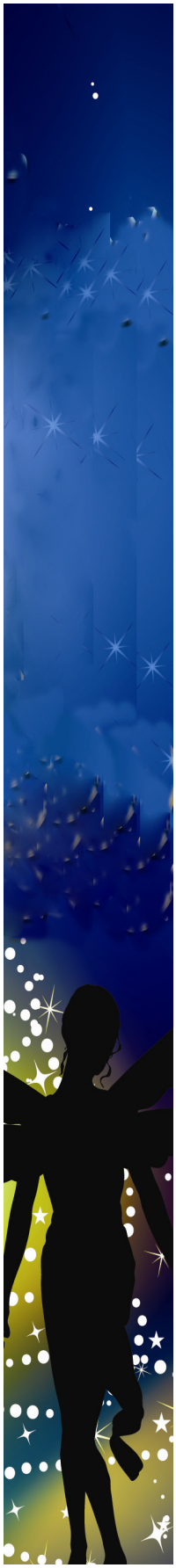
The best strategy is to send an outline and a few sample pages of script to the Children's Drama department of your chosen TV company, with a covering letter detailing your experience of script-writing.

When choosing a company, as well as researching the sort of drama they produce, do check that their license is not due for renewal soon. Unless it is the BBC, license renewal is not automatic, and you don't want your script to disappear into a defunct company!

Script Changes

Be warned, however, they will not consider your script to be sacrosanct. It is well known in TV circles that everyone, from producer to actors, will want multiple alterations. If you want to write for TV, you will have to accept this with good grace, if you are not to be labelled 'difficult to work with'. Such a label is suicide in a buyer's market like TV.

The best possible chance you have of your script being filmed as written is if you are the producer. The writing team of **Jimmy Perry** and **David Croft**,



who co-wrote many sit-coms, (**'Dad's Army'**, **'Hi-de-Hi'** are just two) would not allow any of their actors to change the dialogue. But the only reason they got away with this, was because David Croft was also the producer.

I have witnessed the result of script changes made by the actors and it is a difficult one. While in many instances, it can and does improve the original script, it can also damage it. When you consider that the writer or writing team, spend hours doing nothing else but planning and writing the script, agonizing over every word, it's small wonder that changes made by others can ruin a good script.

But, and here's the nub, if the script is slated, it's the writers reputation at risk, not the actors or anyone else who changed the original dialogue.

So, if you have truly learned your craft and what you produce is so different and unique that you know if anyone else makes changes it will ruin your script, then you will have to decide whether you insist on no changes. If you do this, you run the risk of having your work turned down. However, **Stephen Poliakoff** was faced with this dilemma and he won his case. Because his work is so unique, the productions of his scripts are exactly as he envisages and writes them – but as I say, he had to be tough and insist. He also directs his own work.

Costs

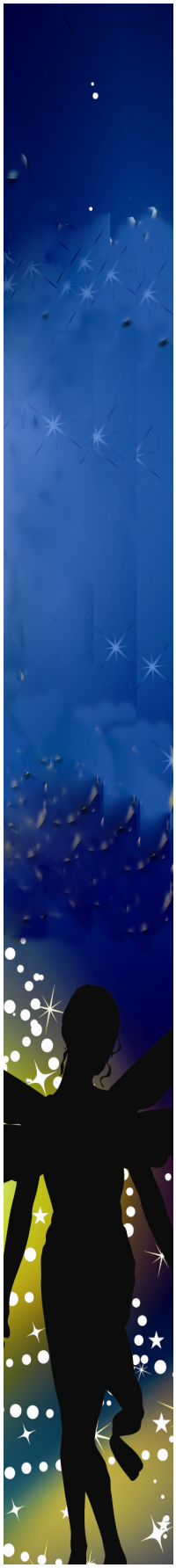
There are a few techniques that you need to know when writing for TV, and they mostly arise from the need to keep costs down. In a totally unionised industry, from actors to technicians, a carelessly written script can cost **thousands of wasted pounds** in production.

The rule is to keep the number of actors and sets low, to avoid scenes set out of doors and complex special effects. Technicians demand regular breaks and extra expenses for working outside, so having to shift all the cameras and rearrange the lights on to a different set could put the team into a meal break, which means everything stops.

Do it outside, where the weather has a nasty tendency to change during a meal break, and there are make-up and wardrobe people to pay for another day as well as all the technicians and actors!

Even modest special effects cost thousands to produce. If you want one car crashing into another which then explodes in a ball of fire, you can kiss goodbye to fifty thousand pounds - minimum! That's £50,000 for twenty seconds of television. Without this scene, you could probably shoot the entire half hour program for less than this! And that single scene will take a minimum of a full day to rig and shoot.

You can get round some of this by writing your scenes carefully and using clips of film. Consider a scene where a boy snatches some money from a shop



and escapes by jumping onto a passing bus:

Shot 1 shows the inside of the shop, with the boy looking shifty.

Shot 2 is a close-up of the money on the counter and the boy's hand reaching for it.

Shot 3 is the boy rushing for and through the door.

Shot 4 is a close-up of the counter, showing that the money has gone.

Shot 5 is the shop-keeper shouting "Hey!" and rushing for the door.

Shot 6 is taken from outside, with the shop-keeper coming through the door, pausing, and looking down the road.

Shot 7 is a piece of stock film of a bus disappearing round a corner.

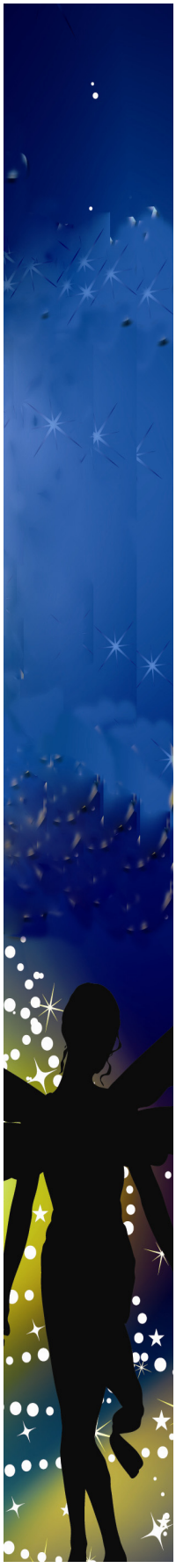
Shot 8 is inside the shop again, with the shop-keeper reaching for the telephone and saying "Little bastard, they'll never catch him, he got on the bus."

The viewers haven't actually seen the boy outside the shop at all, let alone get on a bus, but they will accept the visual clues and take it for granted that he did get on the bus. All of these shots, with the exception of the piece of film, which will have come from a film library, can be done in the studio with a single set.

There is another side to location filming, which frankly drives everyone on set to distraction and it’s the lack of time. Because costs have to be kept to a minimum, half-hour dramas can be filmed in as little as four days and that is for the entire drama filmed on **different** locations.

It’s a mad dash between locations and each night back to the hotels for the entire film crew:

- Producer/s
- Director/s
- Actors
- Camera team
- Sound crew
- Lighting crew
- Technicians
- Make-up
- Costumes
- Secretary



- Writer/s
- Caterers
- Drivers

Be prepared, if you are on location and watching the filming, you will more than likely be roped in to play an extra if they are short. This can be fun, and you may or may not know that the novelist, **Colin Dexter** made a cameo appearance in all of the **'Inspector Morse'** episodes.

The Techniques of Play Writing

Most professional playwrights say that their ideas come to them as a situation rather than a story-line. They see something that makes them think "I wonder what would happen if..." and it develops into a plot from there.

For example, you might see a group of children hiding around a corner as another child approaches. The single child does not look happy or confident, and you conclude that what you have seen is not an innocent game of hide-and-seek. Is it an ambush, an episode in an ongoing sequence of bullying an unpopular child?

If it is, you have **all the ingredients of a good play:**

- A main character with a predicament
- A problem that he has to address and resolve before he can carry on with his normal life.

To put it another way, a situation that leads to a **change** in his life.

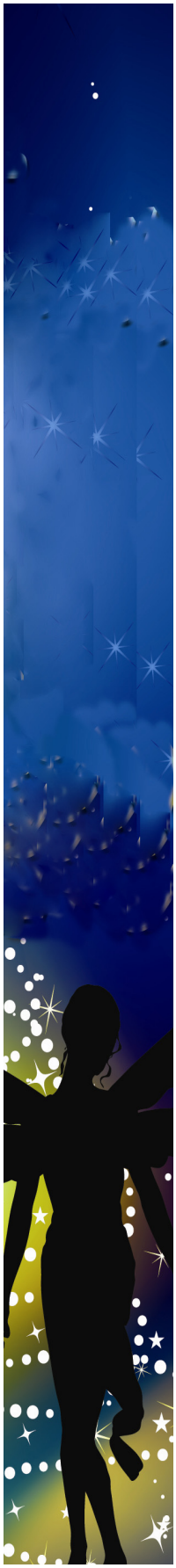
Drama is essentially about such life changes and the conflicts they produce.

The complexity of your plot will dictate the length of the play or vice versa if you are writing to a specific time slot.
For example:

- A short play, usually of one act only, will have a simple plot.
- A longer play, usually of three acts, will have time to develop a more complex plot and possibly a sub-plot as well.

One-act plays need to get straight into the action, and for this reason the main characters should be on stage as the play begins. **You must introduce the problem within the first two or three lines.**

Longer plays still need to have the problem introduced in the first few lines, but this can be in the form of a hint rather than a direct confrontation. The main character does not have to be on stage at the beginning, and it is perfectly legitimate for the audience to be aware of the



problem before the main character.

For example, in the story of the two music pupils Susan and Mary:
Susan might not be aware, when this play opens, that she has competition for the single college place. Since you cannot write a descriptive passage explaining how much the chance to go to college means to her, your best way to get this information across to the audience is by warning them that the blow is about to fall, then letting them see her reaction when it does.

So, your opening scene could be inside the music teacher's room, with him on the telephone saying, "Yes, yes, of course I will be gentle when I tell her. I know how much this place at college means to her. But I believe she has every chance of winning the place - Susan is remarkably talented, you know".

In three sentences, the audience has been told five essential things:

- The main character's name (Susan).
- That the main character has a talent.
- That she is going to have to fight for the chance to develop that talent.
- That she wants very much to go to college.
- That Susan does not know that she is going to have to fight for what she wants.

This is the whole essence of drama. The story must move on without getting side-tracked in descriptions of the characters or the settings.

All the audience can know is what they hear and see - and not even the latter in a radio play.

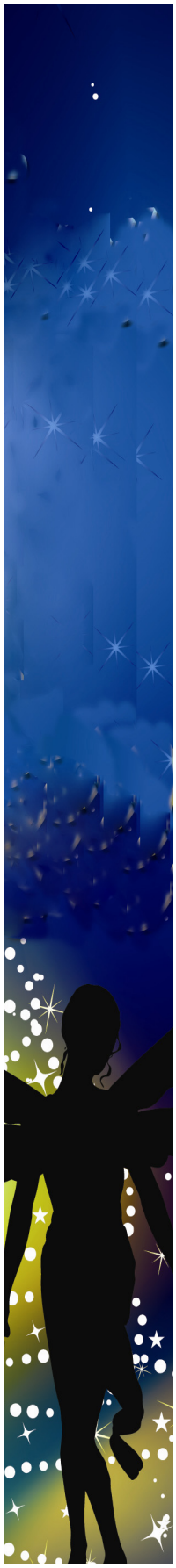
Every line that you write must serve one of only two possible purposes:

- To drive the action forward.
- To explain the motivations and personalities of the characters.

Both purposes must be fulfilled. It is very easy to concentrate on the action and forget to develop your characters fully.

For this reason it is a good idea to spend some time writing a description of each character and a potted history of their lives. This is for your benefit alone. Your description of each character in the script can be no more than a couple of lines (Susan is sixteen and a talented violinist), but the full description which you compose for yourself will help you round out each character into a person whose life will go on after the curtain falls.

Professional actors will often sit around and discuss how the characters would think and feel about a certain situation. This helps them to grow into the part.



The Function of the Driver

A play needs a 'driver' - a character who dictates the action and drives it forward. The driver is not necessarily the main character and frequently is the person who has caused the problem your hero has to resolve.

In **'Macbeth'**, it is Lady Macbeth who drives her husband to murder the king, and in **'Othello'** it is Iago who fans Othello's jealousy of Desdemona.

In our story of the musicians, the driver could be:

- **The music teacher** who encourages Susan to compete for the place at college.
- Or it could be **Mary** who goads her into action, by stating that it is she who will get the college place because Susan is not good enough.

You can only bring together all of these essentials into a satisfactory script if you carefully plan. If anything, it should be more detailed than a plan for a book, all the way down to an indication of the content of each line of dialogue.

In this way, you can properly plan the points at which you want to:

- Flesh out a character.
- Or move the action forward.

The Stages of Planning

Plays have four levels of division:

- Acts
- Scenes
- Segments
- Beats

Acts

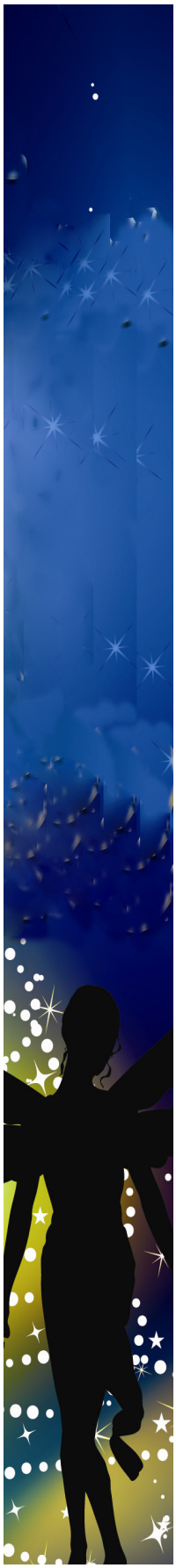
The largest division is the **act.** An act is a distinct section, ending when the story is about to make a change of direction. Often it is accompanied by a change of scenery.

Stories, no matter which format they take, are divided into three parts:

- Beginning
- Middle
- End

And in a longer play this relates to:

- Act I



- Act II
- Act III

Scenes

The Acts are divided into scenes.
A scene deals with:

- A separate plot event
- Or a specific period of elapsed time.

Acts and scenes are marked in the script.

Segments

Each **scene** is divided into **segments**; they are not marked in the script.

A segment consists of:

- A block of verbal exchange, usually between two or more characters but occasionally as a monologue.

A segment finishes when:

- A conversation finishes, or another character joins the conversation, or when an interruption, such as a ringing telephone occurs.

Some people refer to these segments as scenes, but this is incorrect.

Beats

Each **segment** is itself divided up into **beats**. Just as a conversation can range over several topics, so **a segment is split by the changes of topic in dialogue**.

For example, in our story of bullying, a segment might consist of a conversation between the hero and another boy in the school cloakroom at the end of the day.

Beat 1 is when the two boys greet each other.

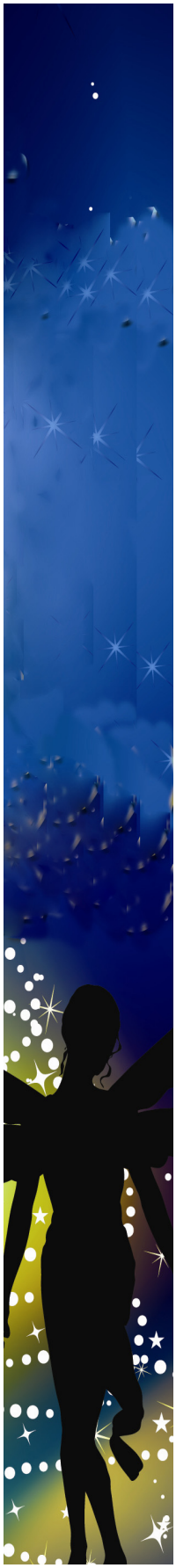
Beat 2 is when they mention the maths master.

Beat 3 is a discussion on maths homework.

Beat 4 consists of the second boy asking why our hero doesn't take the shortest route home any more, and our hero giving an evasive answer.

Beat 5 is them saying goodbye.

You write it in your scenario like this:



ACT ONE. SEGMENT A. Conversation in cloakroom between Mick and Colin.

Beat 1: Greetings.
Beat 2: Maths master.
Beat 3: Maths homework.
Beat 4: Why odd route home?
Beat 5: Goodbyes.

You do this, segment by segment, throughout the whole play.

There are two types of beat:

- Plot beats.
- Character beats.

Plot beats are the dramatic equivalent of story points:

- The lines that move the action on.
- Preparing the way for a later event.
- Explaining something that has happened before.

Character beats are the indications of personality, either of the speakers, or of the person being discussed. They can cover:

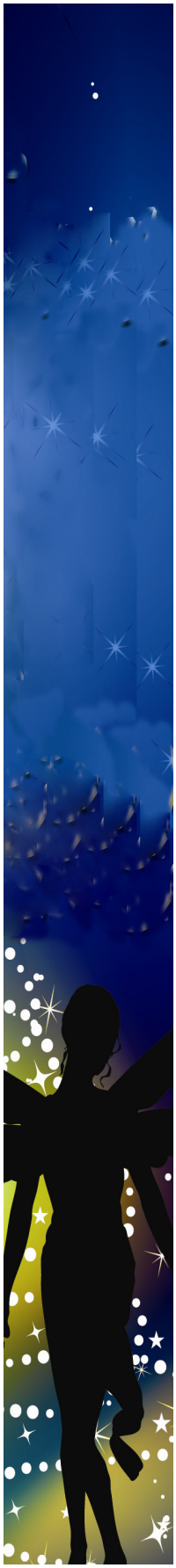
- Motivation.
- Likes and dislikes.
- Indicating a level of courage.
- Showing that someone is sneaky by letting them make a snide comment.

Although in any given segment, one type of beat will usually predominate; you do not need to rigidly separate them.

In the segment detailed above, beats **1,2,3,** and **5 are character beats**, demonstrating that our hero Mick is a friendly boy, that he gets on well with the teachers and that he likes and is good at maths. (This is enough to single him out as a swot and therefore a target for bullying by less intelligent boys.) Beat **4 is a plot beat** because it tells us that Mick is taking evasive action against his tormentors.

Hot Insider Tip…

You should not write any actual dialogue until you have completed your scenario. It is far easier to adjust and rewrite at the scenario stage than it is when you have written dialogue.



The trouble is that once you have committed the words to paper you tend to fall in love with them and you don't want to lose any of them. Even the most brilliant exchange may **damage the proper direction of the play,** so you shouldn't take the risk until the scenario is polished into the correct form.

Writing for Puppet Theatres

There is very little market for puppet plays, as the tradition is for the puppeteers themselves to write their own plays to suit the range of puppets they own. There is also a strong tradition of improvisation.

However, if there is an active puppet theatre near you, it might be worth enquiring, or you could contact The Puppet Centre (Battersea Arts Centre, Lavender Hill, London SW11 5TJ, http://www.puppetcentre.org.uk/) for the latest situation. Polka Theatre in Wimbledon also occasionally put on excellent puppet plays.

Book Adaptations for Radio or Television

While there is a continuous demand for good book adaptations, producers rarely accept them from beginners. However, if you have a favourite book which you feel would make a good play, you will have to start by obtaining permission from the holder of the copyright in the book.

If the author is still alive, this will probably (but not always) be the author, but check with the publishers who will be able to put you in touch with the copyright holder.

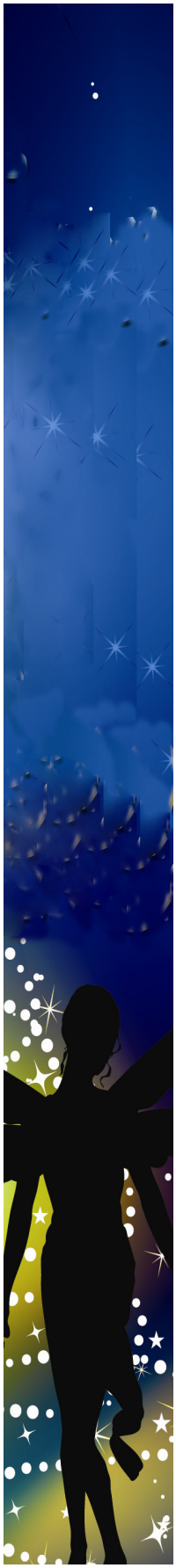
An Option

If the book itself is popular you may find that an option has already been granted. If it has not, you should ask for an option yourself, rather than pay a large fee for the right to adapt before you have a contract from a producer for the adaptation. You will almost certainly find that the copyright holder will insist on the right to approve your adaptation before production commences.

Before you do any of this, listen to or watch some adaptations of books and compare them with the books themselves, to see what has been cut out, what left in, and what added to make sections clearer.

Ideally, you should read the book before you see/hear the adaptation, and give some thought to how you would adapt it, then see how close your version is to the version you are observing.

Andrew Davies is without doubt, one of the top scriptwriters in the specialized area of dramatizing the classic novels. He penned the script for, **'Middlemarch'** by **George Elliot** amongst others. Andrew Davies has also written children's books.



Writing Picture Strips for Magazines

This is a market that may not have occurred to you as a serious outlet for your work. Indeed, you may feel it is rather beneath you, something a 'real writer' would not do.

Obviously it depends on your own concept of what being a writer is about, but if you want to get your work in front of a young audience, there is nothing shameful about producing material that will be read avidly by children who would often not bother to read other books. **Anything that encourages children to read is worthwhile.**

If you are concerned with making a living from your work, writing picture scripts is a good way to earn a regular income. It is a market that is always hungry for material and which is happy to welcome new writers.

Again though, the market place is always changing and the safest way to know you have the most updated information is to log onto the Internet. Most of the publishers' websites include whether they are taking submissions at present and if they are especially searching for particular subject matter.

Two companies worth checking, who own most of the weekly picture magazines are: D C Thompson & Co Ltd (Albert Square, Dundee DD1 9QJ, http://www.dcthomson.co.uk/) and Fleetway Publications (Irwin House, 118 Southwark Street, London SE1 0SW).

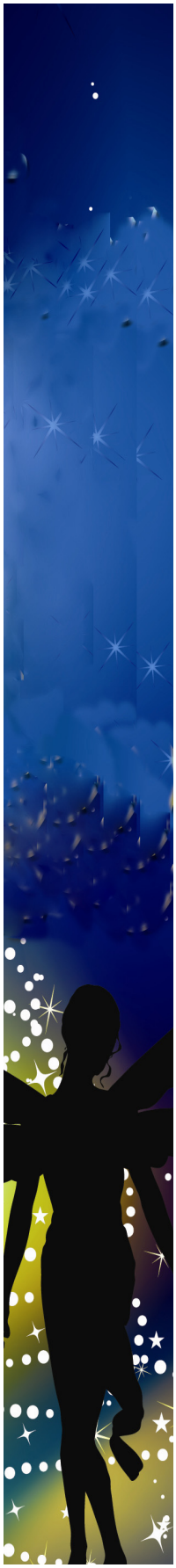
Don't forget to print off the submission guidelines if applicable. If you type children's magazines into the search engine, you can keep in tune with all of the latest developments and even know when new magazines are launched. Also the trade magazine, the 'Bookseller' is well worth subscribing to.

Every publisher's submission guidelines advise you to study several copies of the particular magazine you hope to write for and to tailor your own scripts to meet the length and format they use.

Subjects

The range of subjects is enormous, depending on the magazine you choose. From simple adventures with fairies for pre-school children, through sport, science fiction, conservation, adventures and school stories, to romance for teenagers; any subject is acceptable as long as it makes for a good story.

There is scope for stories written around existing characters as well as your own new characters. Many of the characters in today's comics, such as Dennis the Menace or Beryl the Peril, have been popular for decades and editors are anxious about meeting their requirement of a story each week. In the case of such well-established characters, the copyright in the character is owned by, or licensed to, the publication, and many of the stories are written by a team of writers.



When you have completed your research and analysis of the editor's requirements, write one full script and half-a-dozen synopses of additional stories. This will show that you are capable of, and willing to, produce a regular supply of scripts. They prefer this to intermittent one-off contributions.

Copyright

If you come up with a new character that the editor likes, he will want to buy the copyright on the character as well as all the story-lines you can produce.

If possible, you should resist this and sell a license only. If your character proves popular enough for toys and other spin-offs (even TV series) you will receive no more money if you have sold the character.

It is the editor who will choose the illustrator for your strip, and you are unlikely to have any contact with the illustrator, other than via the written instructions in your script.

As with stage directions for plays, these instructions should be no more than generalities, allowing the illustrator the artistic freedom to interpret your words. However, do be careful how you phrase your instructions, as this work is often done by overseas artists whose native language is not English. For instance, if you describe a slum-dwelling urchin as a 'street-Arab' (not very PC of course!) you may well get a picture of someone in a djellabah.

Early Years

For pre-school children:

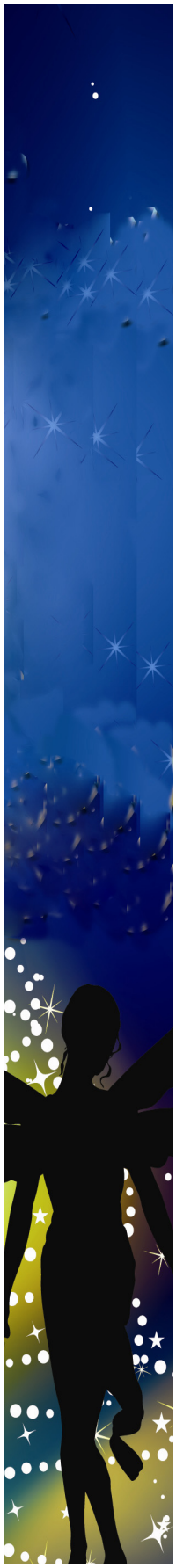
- Restrict yourself to no more than half-a-dozen characters in all and ideally no more than three should appear in any picture or 'frame'.
- The plot should be very simple, and told in ten or twelve frames.
- The main characters should be young children, toys, small animals or fairies, and it is perfectly legitimate for toys and fairies to interact with the children.

Remember, many small children have strong relationships with their favourite toy, and many have what adults refer to as 'imaginary' friends, so children will accept such interactions as perfectly normal.

You can build many simple stories around the difficulties animated toys or fairies would have in coping with the sheer size of the human world. If you are less than six inches high, even getting the lid off a tea-pot is a major task unless you have help.

Unlike strips for older children and teenagers, strips for pre-school children do not include dialogue. The pictures and the captions alone tell the story.

Ideally, the story should be readable and understandable in pictures if you



remove the words, and in words if you remove the pictures. This is the hallmark of good strip writing.

Children like to look at the strips when there is no-one available to read to them, or may be tucked up in bed and unable to see the pictures when there is a reader available. Obviously, words and pictures must agree, and enhance each other. For a near perfect example of this, re-visit Rupert the Bear.

You should present your script for a picture story for pre-school children with the instructions to the artist followed by the caption.

Example:

Picture 1: Anna goes to the end of Grandma's garden and meets a goose. The goose flaps its wings and hisses at her.

Caption 1: Anna went to visit her Grandma. Grandma had a new pet - a bad tempered goose called Jemima.

Older Children and Teenagers

For older children and teenagers, the plot can be more complex and involve more characters. If the story demands adult characters, such as a military adventure, then use adults, but otherwise you should try to use children.

The stories themselves are longer, usually of 24 frames, but there is scope for longer stories, published as separate books, of up to 150 frames. **The cartoon strip format is very popular - even for adults.** Japanese strips called **Manga** are hugely popular these days – you may consider trying your hand at those.

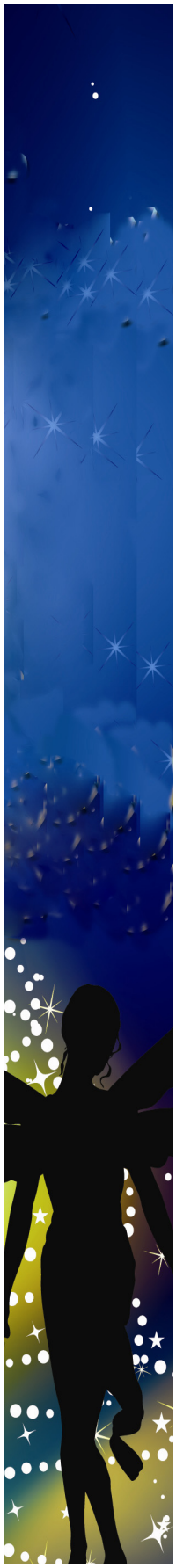
Dialogue or thoughts shown in balloons, move the action forward.

Captions are restricted to conveying the passing of time ("that evening"), moving the location of the story ("meanwhile, back at the ranch"), or bringing the reader up to date at the beginning of each episode of a serial ("Jeff has been appointed medical officer of the Enterprise, only to find his old enemy, Matt Richards, is on board").

Each Frame

Each frame shows a single moment in time. Since each frame shows a single moment in time, no character can speak twice in any given frame.

You can use more characters but you still need to restrict the number appearing in each frame, or the picture will appear cluttered. The artist also needs to allow room for the speech balloons without obscuring any of the characters. For the same reason, and to avoid confusion, each frame should include no more than two balloons.



Each new frame must show some movement from the last frame, so you cannot indulge in long and complex conversations.

Your research on your chosen magazine will have shown you the norm for the length of each speech or thought, but it is rarely more than 20 words and usually considerably less.

Editing

Hone your editing skills.

For example, your first thought might be to write:

"Digby, turn on the oscillator and prepare the transporter beam!"

This needs reducing, so how about:

"Digby, prepare the transporter beam!"

That's better, but still wordy. **This works:**

"Energise the transporter!"

Much better! We know who Digby is. There are only two people in the frame and so it is obvious who is being spoken to. The word 'energise' has a lot of, well, *energy*, and the whole exchange is short and snappy.

Romantic Picture Strips

Some of these are in photographic rather than drawn form. A major part of the market for teenagers consists of romantic stories for the girls.

Your script for either of these markets will now consist of the three elements of:

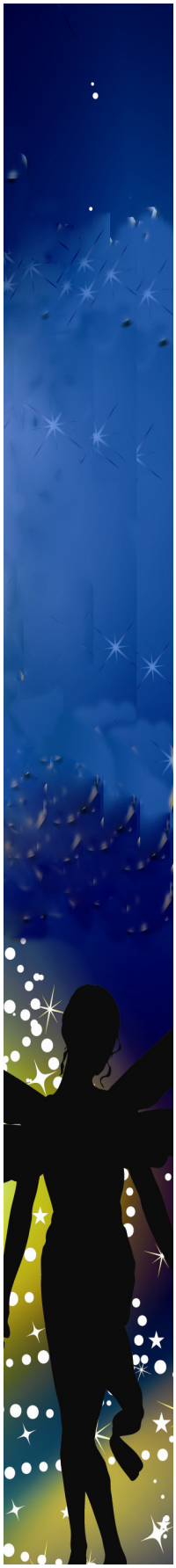
- Instructions to the artist.
- Captions where applicable.
- Dialogue.

Example:

Picture 1: Jackie is in the stable-yard, about to get on to a horse. Tony is holding the horse and smiling at her, while Sharon watches.

Caption 1: Jackie hopes Tony will take more notice of her if she learns to ride as well as Sharon does.

JACKIE: "This will be the first time I've been on a horse."



SHARON (thinks): "Hope she falls off. That'll teach her to make a play for Tony."

Apart from the captions, writing for picture strips is very much like writing drama. You must reduce your story to its dramatic essence, and its main movement is through its dialogue. Your instructions to the illustrator replace the stage directions, and the illustrator interprets these just as a producer will interpret stage directions in the theatre.

Picture stories are a valid medium in their own right, but even if you don't take to them for their own sake, writing them is good practice for any would-be dramatist.

Contracts for Dramatic Works

Whilst you do not necessarily need an agent to negotiate book contracts for you, contracts for plays or other radio or television material are potentially so complex that it is best to seek professional advice before signing.

The areas that should be covered are:

A basic licence to perform the stage play. This will define the number of performances, the period during which they are to be given, and the percentage of the box office receipts which you will receive. Provincial repertory companies who take the risk of putting on a new play will usually want a share of your earnings from subsequent performances by other companies.

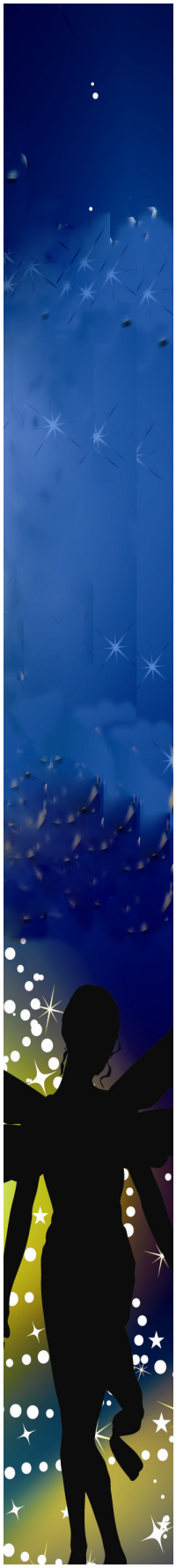
Other rights. These include the rights (which you should retain) for amateur performances; foreign language performances; and film, television, radio, video or CD/DVD performances or extracts. You can license all of these rights to various companies or individual impresarios for agreed periods of time. These licenses can be exclusive or territorial.

Options. You can grant options to take up any of these rights, which means you cannot grant a licence to anyone other than the option holder for the agreed period.

Payments and Royalties. This covers the percentage you will receive and details of how often and when you will be paid.

Script alterations and rehearsals. You should be granted the right to attend all rehearsals. No alterations should be made to the script without your approval and any that are made should then become your property.

Cast approval. Well-known playwrights usually have cast approval rights. It is unlikely that you will be granted these as an unknown beginner, but you should be consulted.



Publication rights. If you grant these to a publisher who specialises in producing actor's copies of plays, they will probably want to handle the collection of amateur performance fees.

Radio and Television contracts. There are set minimum rates for plays written for TV or radio, and for other work for radio, such as short stories or talks. All have different rates for beginners and experienced writers, all are dependent upon length, and all are negotiable. You should receive additional fees for repeat broadcasts, which will be lower than the original fee.

Presenting Your Script

Just as with manuscripts for books, you should type your play script onto one side only of A4 paper, double spaced, with good wide margins on both sides.

Each page should bear the title, and should be numbered in case someone drops the whole thing. If you have to send it out several times before it finds a home, ensure that it is pristine every time, even if it means printing off another copy.

Do not ever send your only or last copy unless you have it on at least one computer disc, as the gremlins will gleefully take this as a challenge to lose it!

The first page should contain a brief description of the play, the required cast and an indication of the scenes, thus:

BOUDICCA'S REVENGE by **Jan Jones** - a fast-moving play about a young Roman boy's race to save his brother from Boudicca's clutches.

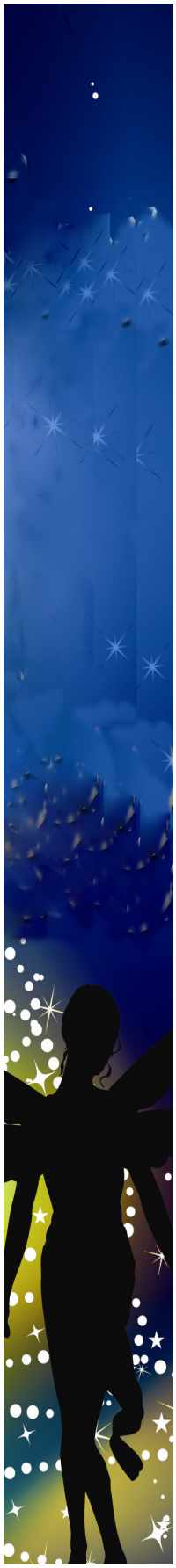
CAST: M12, F3. SCENES: a Roman villa, British countryside, Boudicca's camp.

(M12 means, of course, twelve males, and F3 means three females.)

There are a number of ways to set out the main body of the script, and all are acceptable. The most commonly used is with the character's names and stage directions on the left and the dialogue on the right, thus:

UNCLE BALBUS:	You mustn't worry about Flavius. He is a good soldier and the army is doing all that it can to rescue them.
MARCUS (frowning):	I know, uncle - but will they be in time to save my brother?

Alternatively, you can centre the character's names and dialogue and place stage directions on the left, thus:



UNCLE BALBUS
(smiling reassuringly)
The army looks after it's own, my boy.
They will not leave good men in Boudicca's clutches.

MARCUS
But is there nothing we can do to help?

BALBUS walks across and puts his arm round MARCUS' shoulders. They stand silent for a moment.

BALBUS
Come, let us go and see what your aunt is doing.

Whichever method you choose, it is normal to show character's names in upper case.

Titles

A good title is crucial to how well your book or play will sell. It should be simple and not too long, and it should indicate the type of story. **Children are particularly keen on this last point,** and many younger readers also like a title that includes a name, so they know whether the book is about a boy or a girl.

It is surprising how many new writers get this wrong. They call their book 'Thornlake', or 'Bright Crystal', neither of which give the faintest clue about:

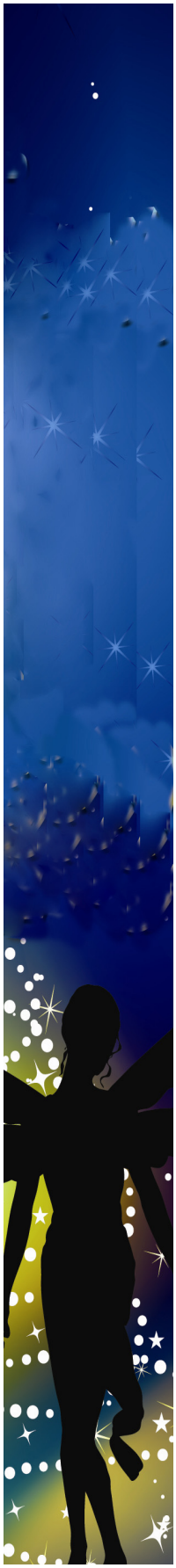
- The age group.
- The genre. The above two titles could be about *anything*.
- The sex of the target readership.

You, as the writer (who has lived, breathed and slept the book for the past year) know that 'Thornlake' is the name of the country house at which your mystery occurs - but the word 'Thornlake' won't mean a thing to the reader until they get to chapter two - which they won't because they will not buy the book in the first place.

If you have a major publishing company backing you, who are prepared to launch your book with a huge marketing campaign, then nebulous titles can work – because the marketers make it clear who the book is written for.

Otherwise a title like: **'Carla's Revenge'** is far better. We know it is a girl's book, and we know it is probably a mystery story.

Many writers keep lists of title ideas, and say it is the title that comes to them first and the story builds itself from the title. If you get into the habit of keeping your eyes and ears open for likely titles you will soon find that you have a good list to draw from.



Working Title

If it happens the other way round with you and it is ideas for stories that come first; or if you find it difficult to think of good titles at all, don't worry. You can start writing, or even complete your story without any more than a working title, and that need be no more than 'Jane and the twins'.

You will need to do a little better than that when you send the book off to your publishers. 'Jane and the Terrible Twins' or 'One Plus Two Equals Trouble', would be better, but you can, if you wish, put 'Working Title' in brackets on the title page of your manuscript.

Editors are quite used to this situation and both they and the marketing department will go out of their way to help you find a title that will both satisfy you and draw readers to your book as it sits on the shelves.

Non-Fiction Book Titles

For non-fiction books, the title should still tell what the book is about, and should still be inviting where possible. Educational book titles are usually a bald statement of the contents, (e.g. 'Examining GCSE Science') but others can still tell of

It is a good idea to check your titles against those in 'Books in Print' in case someone else has had the same idea already. Watch out for several books with similar titles and if necessary change yours. Readers will find it confusing and editors will think it shows a lack of imagination.

For example, there are a number of books for young children at the moment with titles starting 'The Trouble With' and you would not want to join their number.

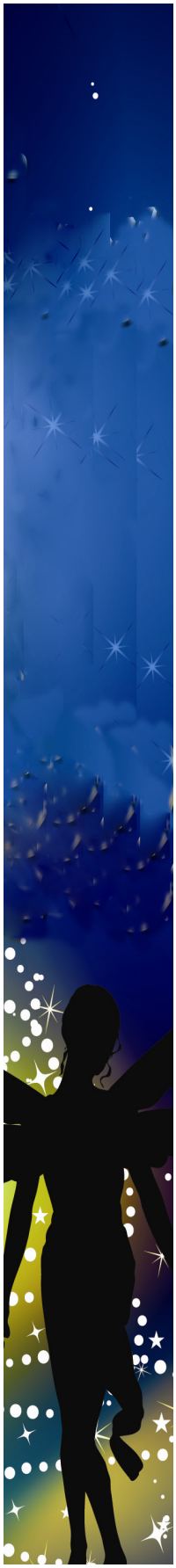
Overcoming Writer's Block

There are two schools of thought on writer's block.

One holds that there is no such thing and that the concept is an indulgence of literary 'artists'. Proponents of this theory are usually hardened professionals who earn their living by writing, and who know that if they start to miss their deadlines they will find it more difficult to get work commissioned and they might starve.

They have little time for 'fair weather' writers who swan around in dressing gowns, back of hand pressed to forehead, exclaiming "Writer's block my dear, it's simply *too* ghastly...".

The other school of thought believes writer's block to be a very real problem; one that freezes the mental processes and stops the words flowing for days on end. It's a bit like stage fright. Some actresses get it, others don't.



If it happens to you, ask yourself first whether you really **believe in the story you are writing.** If you cannot answer with a heartfelt "Yes!", then it is best to lay that story aside, take a few days break, and start on something else. This often causes writer's block - the subconscious mind knowing that the story is useless, but the conscious mind driving you on to finish it, come what may.

Check out Working Timetable

Next, consider whether you are suffering from stress and that you should be taking a break. If you have a full-time job and a family and a busy social life as well as your writing, sometimes it can just all be too much, and a couple of days relaxation will do the trick.

Some writers say that in this situation you should spend your time on activities that do not involve words. So listen to orchestral music, look at paintings, go for walks, or do something with your hands, but avoid the radio and television, reading, and even talking to people if you can. Soon your need to express yourself in words will force you back to your writing place.

Other writers say that the answer is to write - anything. Copy the last few pages you wrote, and often when you get to the end you will find you can carry on where you finished. Or take a fresh piece of paper, or a blank screen, and write

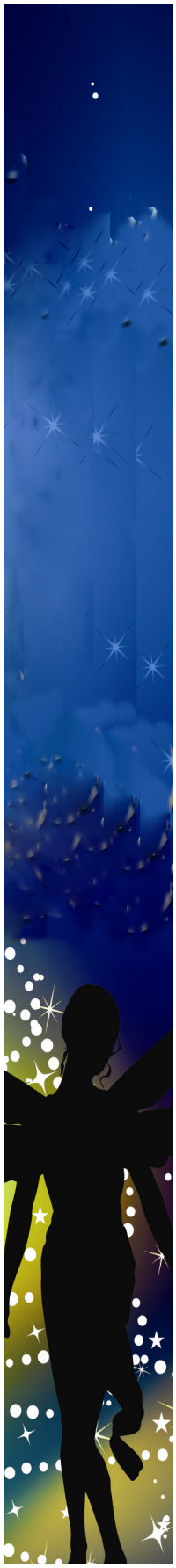
If what you are suffering from is partial paralysis, rather than the full-blown version, and it is a small piece of your story that is stopping you, just skip over it and pick up where you can. **You can always go back to the blank place later and you will usually find that dealing with events further on will clarify your thinking.**

Some other suggestions are that:

- You move to a different room.
- Change writing methods (pen to computer/computer to pen).
- Break off and do something really boring or nasty (wash the car, clean out the fridge, dust high shelves).
- Lie on the floor without a pillow (suffer for your art!).
- Turn the paper round and write in a different direction.

Finally, ask yourself why you should be unable to write. You know it's your job, and you wouldn't freeze up in any other job. Why should you in this one? Would an employer tolerate it if you frequently said "I'm sorry, but I *simply, simply* can't work today - I'm just not in the mood, I suffer from secretary's block you know!"

Ask yourself this intriguing question: Would I suffer from writer's block if I had never heard of it? Have you heard of composer's block, painter's block or



sculptor's block?

Above all, writing is about discipline - self discipline. Do you have what it takes to sit down hour after hour for the many hundreds of hours it takes to turn out a fine piece of writing? If not, find another profession!

Coping With Rejection

All writers get rejection slips - including the best of the best. It's an occupational hazard. Nobody likes it, but it's a fact of life: you can't please all the people all the time.

Some of the major best-sellers of the last twenty years have been rejected several times before they found a publisher who saw their true worth. The authors believed in their work, so they tidied up the manuscript and sent it off to another publisher as many times as it took.

There is a certain amount of luck involved in getting your first book published. It has to arrive with the right editor at the right time. Often, although you may never find this out, someone else submitted a book that is similar to yours, and did it a few days before you did. This is extremely common with non-fiction, but it happens with fiction too. The set of circumstances that triggered the idea in your mind has done the same to someone else, or possibly to several other people.

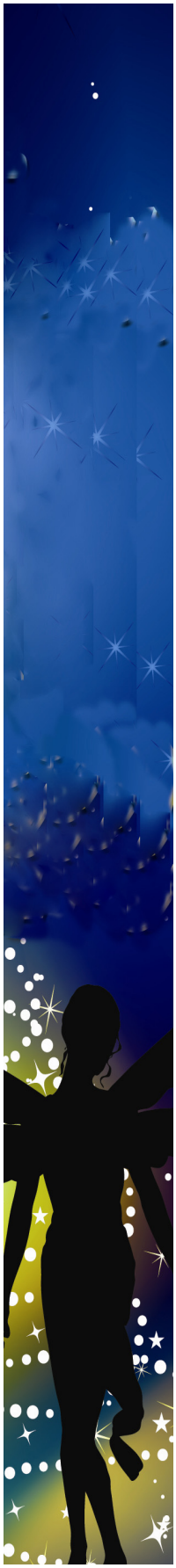
If there are any comments on the rejection slip that tell you of a technical problem, be grateful and do what is necessary to correct it. Although these comments can be brutal (e.g. 'thin plot', or 'wooden characters') at least you have had a professional opinion. All you usually get is a simple printed slip or a form letter that gives no reason for the rejection.

It reads:

"Thank you for submitting this story, but we feel it is not for us at this moment."

In that case, re-read your story and be honest with yourself about its merit.
Ask:

- Does it have the right balance of characterisation, narrative and dialogue?
- Are the events inevitable, or a bit contrived?
- Is the dialogue natural or stilted?
- Was your research good enough?
- Is the story fresh and original?



If all of these points check out, make sure that the manuscript itself does not look travel worn (give it a new title page if necessary and check for grubby fingerprints and missing pages throughout) and send it off to the next publisher on your list. Better still, run off a brand-new copy each time you send it.

Then go and research another likely publisher in case it comes back again.

Keep on doing this as many times as it takes.

While you wait, get on with writing something else. Having another project helps to soften the blow of rejection, and when they finally accept your manuscript, the publishers will soon want to know how long they will have to wait for your next book.

Common Mistakes

Overly Manipulating Characters and Events

Any piece of fiction, whether for adults or children, should consist of **a set of people reacting to each other and to the circumstances in which they find themselves.**

In other words, as far as the reader is concerned, everything that happens does so because it is inevitable, and the writer's role is to describe what happened.

It is not to make things happen, and certainly not to do so in a way that makes your characters behave uncharacteristically; or events look like enemy action (once is an accident, twice is coincidence, three times is enemy action).

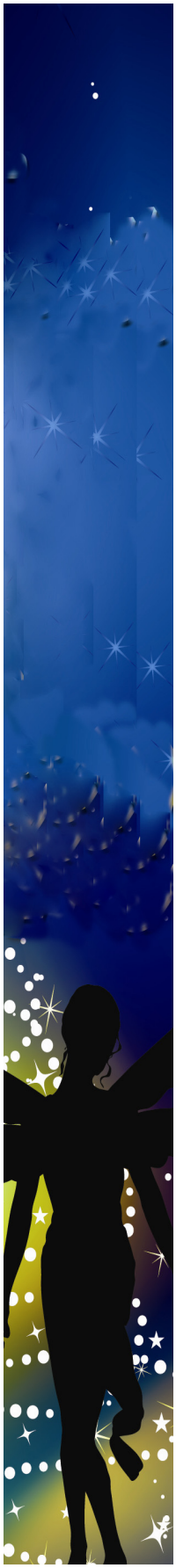
For example:

A teenage boy whose life revolves around motor-cycle racing is not going to take it into his head to go for a long walk to admire the view, thus conveniently arriving at the very spot where some dastardly deed is taking place in time to prevent it.

Walls do not conveniently collapse on villains, unless subsidence and a rain-storm washes out the last of the foundations and undermines them. In any event, this would be just too convenient.

The necessity for such **clumsy manipulation** of events is a simple matter of inadequate planning, and it rarely happens to writers who take the trouble to prepare full outlines of their stories before they start writing.

If you are going to cause some person or piece of scenery to thwart your villain, then you should **prepare sufficiently far in advance for the inevitability of the event when it does happen.**



Never forget that your role as a writer is to be a **narrator of events,** not a puppeteer visibly pulling the strings that make the players and the scenery move.

POST SCRIPT

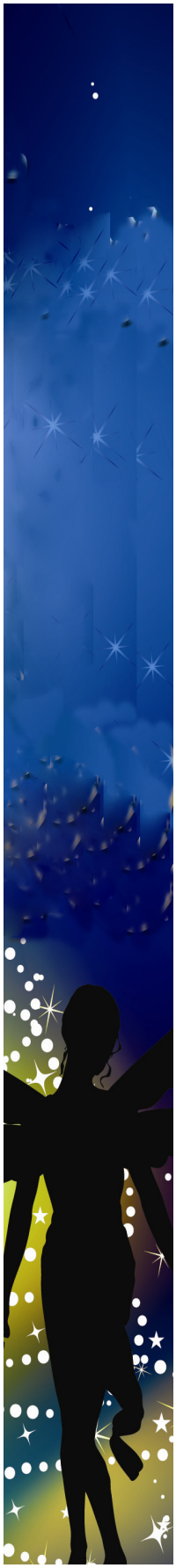
I hope that you have enjoyed this course, as well as learned from it. I have given you a distillation of the experience of many successful writers (including myself) and of the requirements of publishers and magazine editors. Now it is up to you to use what you have learned in developing your career as a writer for children.

Remember - being a *successful* writer is not only about having ideas and getting them down on paper. More than half of the requirement for success is finding out what publishers want and giving it to them, in the form and style and length and immaculate presentation they require. In short, it is about *being professional.*

Being professional means **working hard** at what you do, making sure that the finished product is as near to perfect as you can make it. A man might have tremendous natural strength, but he won't win weight-lifting contests unless he trains to perfect and channel his strength in the right way. Equally, many people have the natural talent to write, but their work lacks polish and attention to detail - in short, it's sloppy and careless. It is only by setting pen to paper, and doing so regularly that you will develop your natural talent into the professional skills that will enable you to bring your characters to the public you intend them for - the children of this and future generations.

To sum up:

- A writer is a person who *writes.*
- A writer is a person who *revises and rewrites as many times as it takes.*
- A writer is a person who *counts words.*
- A writer is a person who *reads the genre they are writing for.*
- A writer is a person who *loves and cares about words and the quality of his or her output.*
- A writer is a person who *writes about people like the target reader.*
- A writer is a person who *researches the market.*
- A writer is a person who *delivers what the publisher wants and NOT what they think the public 'ought' to want.*
- A writer is a person who *checks facts.*
- A writer is a person who *plans before writing.*
- A writer is a person who *works hard to make their writing easy to read.*



- A writer is a person who *gets published*.

If you ever get despondent, just remember that several publishers turned down 'Harry Potter'. And even then even the one publisher who did take it on, only paid £2,500 in advance royalty fees (which is exceptionally low, indicating they had virtually no faith it would sell out its first tiny print run!).

Publishers, like writers are after all only human – and they do sometimes miss seeing that a book is going to be the next Best Seller! So, take comfort and don't give up!

Good luck and enjoy your writing.

Scott Thornton