

Writing for the Toughest Audience

by Shutta Crum

Checklist for Writing Books for Young Readers:

Plot: Do I have a story arc (cause and effect)? Does it include obstacles/a low spot/success & resolution? Can you draw a diagram of your plot?

Beginnings: Hook. Where is my hook? Is the *who, what, where, when* of the story covered early in the manuscript?

Endings: What kind of ending do I have? Final fillip (surprise snap) at the end? Is there a sense of hope? Justice? Irony? Humor? Satisfaction? Have I left any unresolved threads?

Characters: Have I heard my characters' voices in my head? Are they consistent? Are the voices of other characters different from the main character? Do I know my characters' goals and obstacles? Can I list them?

Music: Have I chosen my words wisely? Do they sing? Have I used literary techniques to make them leap off the page? If metrical—have I scanned the meter? Do I know the metrical pattern—can I jot it down? (Use clear plastic.)

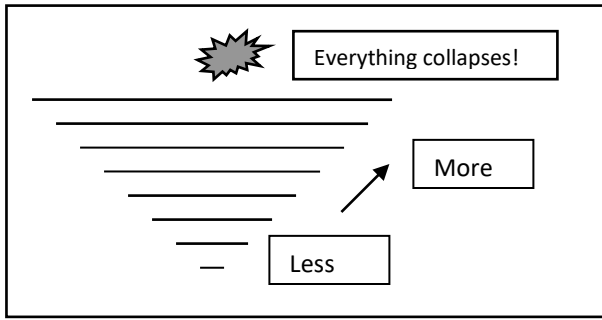
POV: Have I chosen the right character to tell this story? (child or child-like adult) Do I have a consistent point of view & tense?

NARRATOR: Who is my narrator? What kind of voice does/he/she/they have? Attitude to the story?

REVISION: Have I revised to cut extraneous bits? Is it elegant? Have I used strong verbs and "fun" words/patterns? Does it have the *4Hs*: Heart, hurt, humor & hope. Is it as short as I can make it?

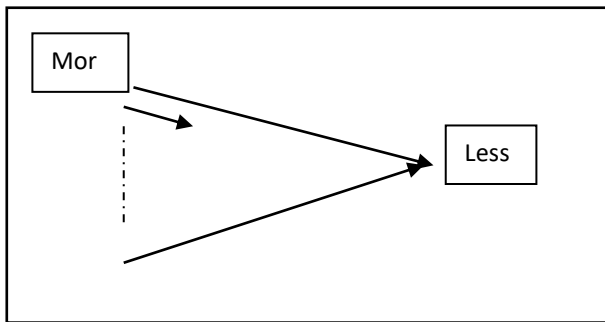
OTHER: Do the words have presence (shape/weight) on the page? Is there something for the adult reader, as well? Are there "added extras" in terms of layers/devices in the story? (Includes secrets, sub-plots, surprises in the illustrations, games, refrains, onomatopoeia, or a way to continue the story after the cover is closed?)

Simple Plot Structures: (With picture book/story examples. Note: many of these are used in novels, too.)



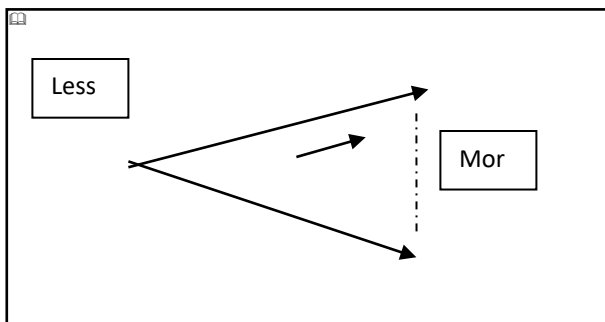
1. Cumulative → Toppling Structure:

- 📖 (Traditional) "The House that Jack Built."
- 📖 Greene. *This is the Teacher.*
- 📖 Polacco. *In Enzo's Splendid Gardens.*
- 📖 Robart. *The Cake That Mack Ate.*



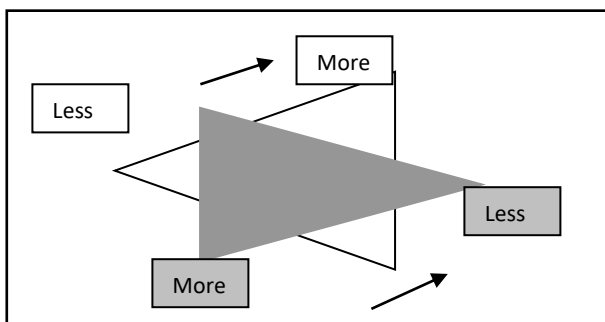
2. Decreasing Structure:

- 📖 (Traditional) "The Tailor."
- 📖 (Traditional) "Ten Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed."
- 📖 Schaefer. *The Biggest Soap.*
- 📖 Wells. *Bunny Money.*



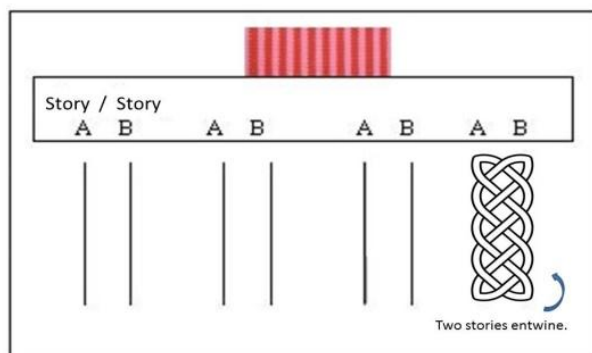
3. Increasing Structure:

- 📖 (Traditional) "The Little Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly."
- 📖 Feiffer. *Bark, George.*
- 📖 Ginsburg. *Mushroom in the Rain.*
- 📖 Grossman. *My Little Sister Ate One Hare.*



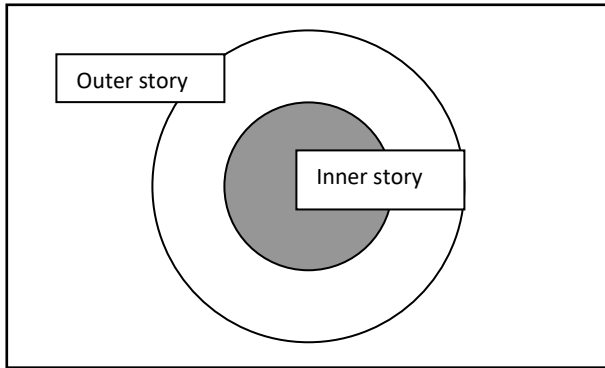
4. Simultaneously Increasing & Decreasing:

- 📖 Crum. *The House in the Meadow.*
- 📖 Gilman. *Something from Nothing.*
- 📖 Hutchins. *The Doorbell Rang.*



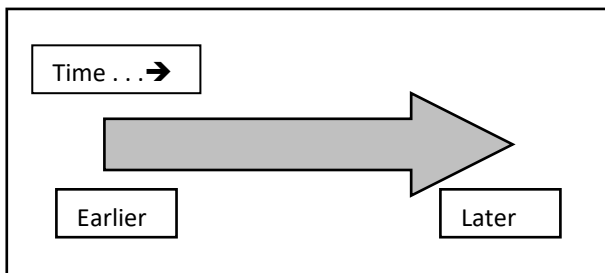
5. Parallel Structure:

- 📖 Asch. *Just Like Daddy.*
- 📖 Crum. *Click!*
- 📖 Noble. *Meanwhile Back at the Ranch.*



6. Story Within a Story Structure: (For more sophisticated readers, the outer and inner plots may have varied structures. Metafictional stories are often structured this way.)

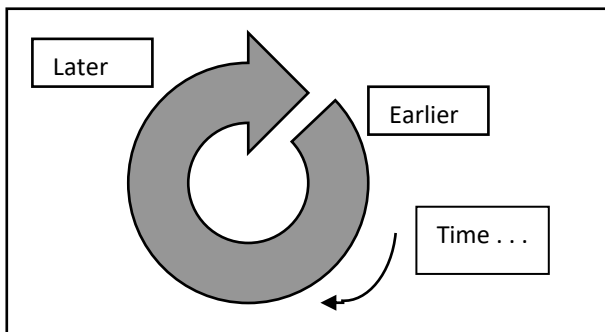
- 📖 Noble. *The Day Jimmy's Boa Ate the Wash.*
- 📖 Wiesner. *Three Little Pigs.*
- 📖 Say. *Kamishibai Man.*
- 📖 Barnett. *Chloe and the Lion.*



7. Time Line Structures:

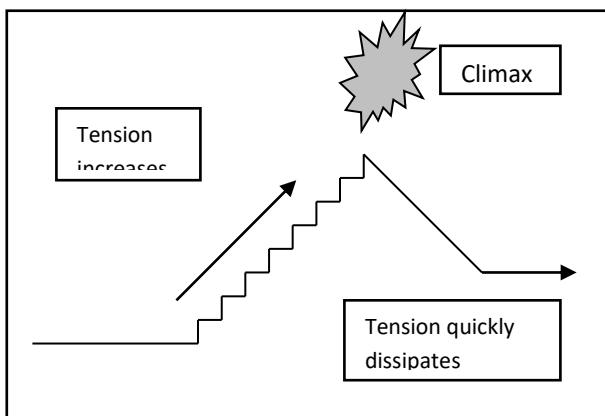
7A. Straight time line:

- 📖 Arnosky. *Every Autumn Comes the Bear.*
- 📖 Carle. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar.*
- 📖 Zimmerman. *Trashy Town.*



7B. Around the clock or full circle:

- 📖 Martin. *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom.*
- 📖 Numeroff. *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie.*
- 📖 Sanfield. *Bit by Bit.*
- 📖 Wheeler. *Bubble Gum, Bubble Gum.*



8. Rising Action Structure: (Exposition, increased tension, climax, denouement. Commonly used.)

- 📖 Crum. *Who Took My Hairy Toe?*
- 📖 Stanley. *Saving Sweetness.*
- 📖 Yorinks. *Company's Coming.*

Here are some things to shrink your word count:

1. Cut adjectives and adverbs in favor of specific verbs. Make those verbs strong. (*Growl vs. shout.*)
2. Remove qualifying words like really, nearly, almost, and seems. Also, phrases such as “tried to,” “started to,” “began to,” or “managed to” can often be replaced with the actual action. Instead of “Started to sit up.” Use “Sat up.” We understand the process of sitting up includes a beg., middle, and end. Only use qualifiers if it is important that the action be started but never finished.
3. Jettison: just and that. “It was the gun that Rick used.” Should be: “It was the gun Rick used.”
4. *There were, it is, it was, it isn’t* are usually not needed. “There were three bears sitting on chairs” is better if said, “Three bears sat on chairs.”
5. *See, hear, watch, look* may not be necessary. “He saw Mother at the door” should be “Mother stood at the door.” You do not need to filter your sentences through the narrator—we know it is the narrator doing all the seeing, feeling, hearing, etc.
6. Do you need both an attribution and an action? “*Let go of me,*” Jessica said. She squirmed. “I’m going to tell Dad.” Use either Jessica said or Jessica squirmed, but not both. If we know who is speaking, it should simply read: “*Let go of me.*” Jessica squirmed.
7. Cut *whichs*. “She ran two blocks to school.” NOT: “She ran to school, which was two blocks away.”
8. Don’t double dip. “He stomped ~~angrily~~ away” doesn’t need *angrily*. You’ve got the strong verb.
9. Two is not better than one. You don’t need a string of adjectives to get a point across.
10. Characters don’t pee in stories, i.e. we don’t need every detail. Allow time to skip ahead.
11. Don’t show and tell at the same time, e.g. “When she saw her broken piggy bank, she cried. She was sad.” Delete “She was sad.” If she’s crying, it is obvious she’s sad.
12. Cut unnecessary prepositional phrases. If there are only two people in a scene we often do not need short prepositional phrases such as “to her,” or “by him.” For ex.: “She scooted closer.” *Is better than* “She scooted closer to him.”
13. Use your universal “find” tool on your document for words you overuse. My main problem is “then.” A lot of people have “suddenly” all over the place. Find and eliminate or replace.

What can I add without adding more words? (Thanks: Ann Whitford Paul for many of these ideas.)

1. Can I include a non-fiction/educational element without making my text dry/pedantic? (In a sidebar or author’s end note?)
2. Can I add a sub-plot? (In an art note under the title indicate if there is to be a subplot in the illustrations . If there is text for the sub-plot, write the ms in two columns.)
 - a. Subplots **must** enhance, further explain, contradict, or complement the main plot.
 - b. Subplots may be in illustrations only.
3. Can I add an interactive game/rhyme/refrain/onomatopoeia/questions to the reader?
4. Can I add an ending that doesn’t end/opens more doors for the reader to imagine afterward?
5. Can I add some kind of physical interaction with the book? (Turn it around, etc.)
6. Can I add something for the adults (& kids) to discover and talk about? (Something educational /silly/hidden in illustrations.)
7. Can the story be framed/set uniquely? Metafictional? Surrealistic? (Futuristic? Very few PB sci-fic.) Graphic--novelish? Other?

NOTES FOR USING A PB DUMMY: (Thanks to Ann Whitford Paul.)

Half-title page. Traditionally, on page 1. Contains the title in smaller type and a small illustration.

Full-title page. This is the first double page spread (pages 2 and 3) and includes the title, the author's name, the illustrator's name, and the publisher's name.

Copyright information. (CIP) This usually appears on p. 4. Sometimes it comes at the end.

Dedications This can appear on page 5 or condensed with the dedication information.

The story usually starts on either pg 5 or 7. (Odd numbered—right hand—page.)

(Note: the editorial team will make the final decision on page breaks. At this point you are simply determining if your story fits within a 32 page dummy format.)

1. **Location.** When the setting changes that is a good time for a page turn.
2. **Characters.** When a new character comes on the scene or leaves, there has to be a new scene.
3. **Patterns.** If you've used a counting, or other sequential pattern, page turns may be built in.
4. **Actions.** If the actions of the characters change, a new scene is necessary. ***Try to leave the odd numbered pages at a point of some intensity or repetition in a pattern, so readers are compelled to turn the page.***

Once you've played around with the dummy form, make a large dummy by stapling 16 8½" x 11" sheets of paper together or folding 8 8½" x 14" sheets of paper together and stapling the middle. Number your pages from 1 to 32. Cut a copy of your story apart and tape sections in your dummy, keeping in mind the front matter. Sometimes the front matter can be tightened to create a little more space. *Use removable tape* as you may need to move things around. With a completed dummy in hand, **read it out loud**. The act of reading and turning the pages allows you to see your story as the reader, or young listener would. Pay special attention to these questions when evaluating it:

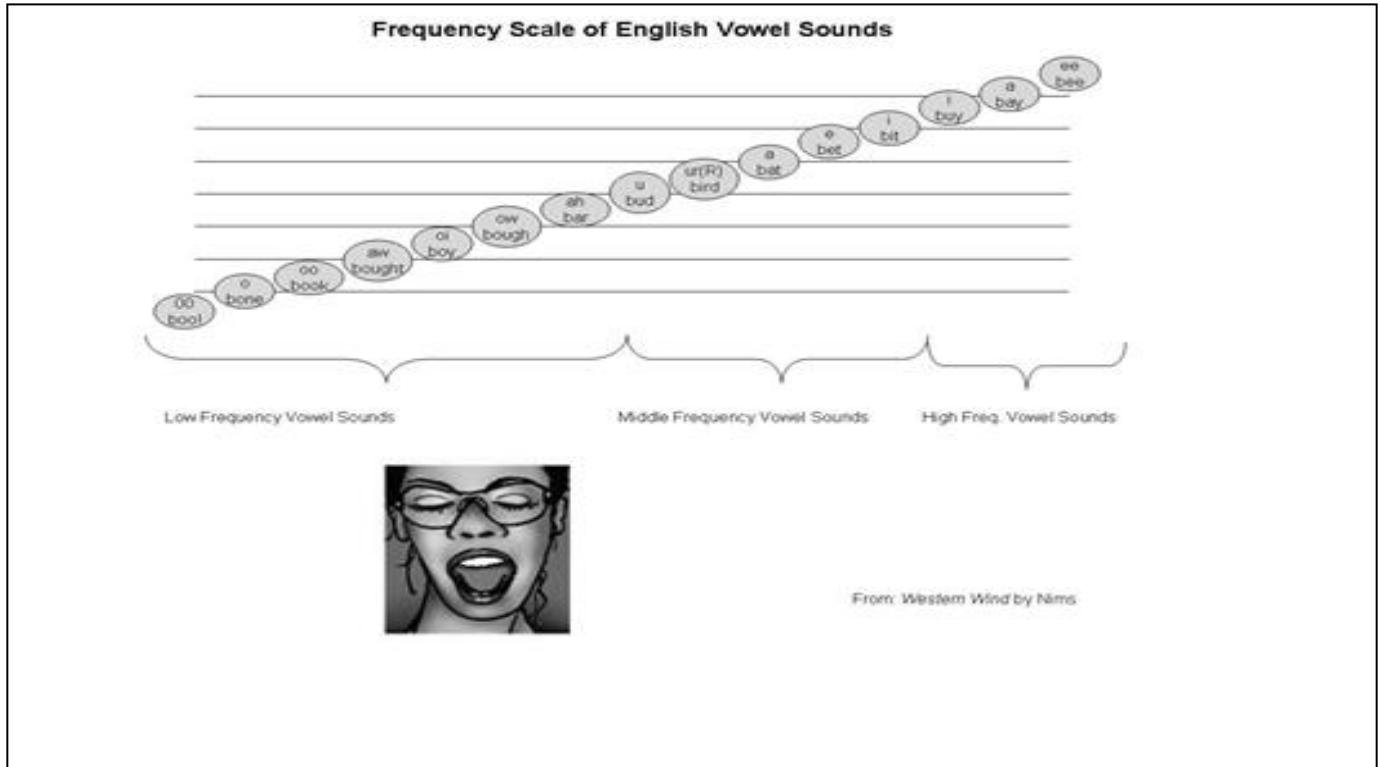
1. **Does your story fit into 32-pages?** Maybe it would work better as a board book or in a 40 page format. (Or a magazine story?) If you are a new picture book writer, try to stick to 32 pages.
2. **Does your story have enough action for at least 13 double-page spreads and one single spread?** Thoughts cannot be easily illustrated. Some dialogue can be illustrated, but think about the actions. Also, negative statements like, "She didn't jump" are hard to illustrate.
3. **Does your text suggest a variety of illustrations?** Move your story about!
4. **By the first or second page (after the front matter), does the reader know what your book is about?** Does the "hook" come early? Have you answered *who, what, where* and *when*?
5. **Does your story have page turns?** Is there forward momentum on the page turns?
6. **Is the action spread over 32 pages?** Are there clumps of text in places and little text in others?
7. **Does your climax happen around page 30 or 31?** If it happens on pages 16 and 17, you may need to add action before the climax.
8. **Do you have a nice tying up of loose ends on page 32?**

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***IF YOU MUST COUNT:** Guidelines only (there are ALWAYS exceptions)!

Board Books: <100 words

Young Picture Books: 100-400 words

Picture Books for preschoolers: 100-900 words

Non-fiction Picture Books: 200-1800 words

Picture Story Books: 1,000-2,000 words

Easy Readers: 600-800 words (Varies depending on grade level; very early readers are much shorter.)

Hi-Lo Books: 700-1,000 words

Chapter Books: 1,000-10,000 words

Mid-grade Novels: 10,000-30,000 words

Young Adult Novels: 30,000+ words (Fantasy novels are often VERY long to approx. 100,000.)

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[Facebook: shuttacrum](https://www.facebook.com/shuttacrum)

[@shutta](https://twitter.com/shutta) [Instagram @shuttacrum](https://www.instagram.com/shuttacrum)

Resources for Adult Writers & Illustrators of Children's Books:

Shutta Crum

www.shutta.com

SITES:

Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators: www.scbwi.org

Children's Book Council: www.cbcbooks.org

Cynthia Leitich Smith's award winning site: <https://cynthialeitichsmith.com/cynsations>

Purple Crayon (Harold Underdown's site): www.underdown.org

The Children's Writing Supersite (Sponsored by the Children's Book Insider): www.write4kids.com

A Writer's Digest best website for agent queries: <http://www.agentquery.com>

Writer's Digest 101 Best websites for Writers, annual list: <https://www.writersdigest.com/tag/best-websites-for-writers>

BOOKS:

About publishing:

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Publishing Children's Books, Third Edition. Harold D. Underdown. Alpha.

***Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market**. Ed. By Alice Pope. Writer's Digest Books, annual.

(**Submissions "Bible" for children's writers!)

About writing:

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Drury, John. **The Poetry Dictionary**. Story Press, 1995.

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Griswold, Jerry. **Feeling Like a Kid**. John Hopkins University Press, 2006.

Jauss, David. **Alone With All That Could Happen**. Writer's Digest, 2008.

Klein, Cheryl B. **Magic Words**, W.W. Norton, 2016.

King, Stephen. **On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft**. Pocket Books, 2000.

Kooser, Ted. **The Poetry Home Repair Manual**. University of Nebraska Press, 2005.

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