

Dummies for Smarties

By [Sarah S. Brannen](#)

Every book for aspiring children's writers seems to include the line “don't illustrate your book unless you're a professional artist.” But what if you are an experienced, talented artist as well as an [aspiring writer](#)? There isn't much help on the bookshelves. Some books mention that after you've written your picture book manuscript, you should make a [dummy](#) book to submit to publishers; they rarely give tips on how to make a professional-looking dummy, though, and it's hard to find advice about what to avoid or what to be sure to do. I tormented the teacher of the first children's illustration class I took, asking questions she couldn't always answer!

This article is an attempt to fill in the gaps. There are almost as many ways to make dummies as there are people who make them, but I have asked a number of author/artists, editors and agents what they prefer to see. Most of the advice in this article is meant for unpublished writer/illustrators.

The books are right about one thing, though. It's best not to write and illustrate your own book unless you are both an experienced artist and a competent writer. If you feel confident about both parts of the process, read on!

Basics

A dummy is a rough mock-up of your book, meant to show an editor the pace of your story, what images you plan to illustrate and your ideas for the design of the book. Will you have text on the left-hand page and illustrations on the right? Are you planning [double-spreads](#) or [spot illustrations](#) on every page? Will the text be in boxes or will it [float on](#) the image? Will the artwork have borders or be [full-bleed](#)?

As both the writer and the illustrator, you will need to write, revise and polish your story, decide on page breaks and text placement, plan and sketch the illustrations and even decide where the dedication will go and whether you'll have a title and [half-title page](#).

Often, you will not choose the [font](#) of the text or design the cover and title page; the art director may design those, working with you and the editor. The editor and art director will both work with you on the illustrations.

Many illustrators start with [storyboards](#) and move on to small [thumbnail](#) dummies. No one but you will ever see them so you can do what works best for you. (Yellapalooza.com may post an article at some point in the future about storyboards and thumbnails). This article is primarily about the finished dummy that you will submit to a publisher.

Uri Shulevitz's [Writing with Pictures](#) explains in detail the structure of a picture book.

- The cover and endpapers are usually not included in the page count
- Page 1 is (usually) the title page; occasionally page 1 is a half-title page
- Page 2 usually lists the copyright information

- Page 3 is sometimes a half-title page, and sometimes a dedication, occasionally it's the title page
Sometimes the story starts on page 3, but in the majority of cases the story starts on page 4 or 5 and ends on page 31 or 32
- Although picture books can also be 24, 40 or 48 pages, it's probably best for the beginner to stick with 32 pages, the length of the vast majority of picture books on the shelves. It gives the publisher one less thing to worry about, like [marketing](#) an unusual-length book.

Picture books are printed on one big sheet of paper which is then cut into pieces; each piece of paper that goes into the book equals four pages, right and left, front and back. Four of these pieces of paper are sewn down the middle, creating a “signature,” which ends up being 16 pages in the finished book. So most picture books are made of two signatures. Look at the edge of a book and you’ll see what I’m talking about. (As ever, there are exceptions. But this is the general practice).

Making the dummy

After you have done storyboards and tiny thumbnail dummies, make at least one rough dummy to work out the structure of your book. Author/artist Katie Davis ([Who Hops?](#)) often makes several rough dummies (and continues to make more as she works with her editor). Experiment with different text placements and do a lot of rough pencil sketches of the illustrations. At this phase of the project you'll probably be working on the story and pictures simultaneously.

When you're ready to do the final dummy pages, make sure that the sketches show all the important aspects of the illustrations. Julie Strauss-Gabel, an editor at Dutton Children's Books*, says that she wants to see fully-considered scenes that show your skill as an artist, writer and visual storyteller. She looks for finesse in visual storytelling as well as in word choice. Agent Steven Malk says it's helpful if the sketches for the dummy are complete. Katie Davis recommends that the sketches be the best they can be without being final artwork. You don't need to show every last freckle and eyelash though; don't worry about details for the dummy. It's best to work in black and white, whatever your preferred drawing medium. Color sketches may imply that you have developed your illustrations to the point that you won't want to make changes; remember that if you get a contract you may need to change every single illustration as well as revise the text.

(If you work only digitally, even your sketches are probably in color. An editor will probably understand this, but you might want to mention in your cover letter that the dummy consists of rough sketches and you're open to making changes).

Make your dummy the same size and shape as you hope the finished book will be. The editor and art director will have input into the final size, in part because of cost considerations, but the size and shape are part of your vision. If you imagine that the page size will be close to 8 ½” by 11” it can be convenient to work at that size.

Although you can glue the text onto copies of your sketches, I think it's best to make or print copies of each page so nothing can fall off. If you're comfortable using Quark or other design programs, you can design the whole book on the computer. I get two-sided copies of my final

dummy pages done at a copy shop, on 70 or 80 lb. paper, which is heavy enough that the printing doesn't show through. It's fine to glue or tape one-sided copies together for each page, if you wish.

You have a lot of leeway in making the cover of your dummy. You can do a careful mock-up of a possible cover, keeping in mind that the publisher will almost certainly change it, or you can do a plain cover with the name of the book and your contact information. Some people make very elaborate covers and sew their dummies together but I don't think it's really necessary.



There are many different ways to put the dummy together. Any stationery or art supply store sells portfolios or notebooks with clear plastic pages (A). Some people slip each dummy page into one of these, and cut out the extra pages with a mat knife. The

advantage of this kind of book is that it's easy to make changes, although you are limited to an 8 ½" by 11" vertical format. The binders can sometimes look a bit cheap, and the whole book doesn't look very distinctive; they usually have black plastic covers, and beware, because these can get too warm in a car and warp in a most unattractive way.

You can simply trim your pages to the desired size and glue or double-stick tape them together if you haven't gotten two-sided copies. Then staple the pages together (B). This is fast and cheap way to make a dummy but leaves little sticky-out staple parts ready to scratch editors



and their desks. Be sure to cover the staples with tape to avoid this!



I make some sort of cover design and print it onto card stock. I use a blank piece of card for a back cover, trim the two-sided copies of the pages to the correct size and shape, and have a copy shop bind the dummy together with Velobind©. It costs about \$2,

looks neat and professional and it's strong and durable.

In the cases of B and C, you'll want to remember to leave a quarter-inch to half-inch "[selvage](#)" on the correct side of each illustration, so that you don't lose any of your picture when you staple or bind the dummy.

You should make several copies of your dummy, so you can submit it to different places, and in case of damage. I recommend making from five to ten copies at a time; I made only three copies of my first dummy and came to regret it when two of them were permanently lost!

Remember that your dummy may be read by a first and second reader, go to a committee or even two committees and be passed all around the offices of a publishing house. It's important that it be sturdy enough not to fall apart, and it's also nice if it's tough enough that you can use it for subsequent submissions should it be rejected the first time.

Author/artist [Lisa Kopelke](#) ([Excuse me!](#)) says, "The one big thing to remember is to find that fine line between being professional, and not going overboard. If you go too far editors may get the impression that you are not flexible. Professional means to keep your presentation simple, classy and easy to handle (like no coffee stains, no money tucked in the folds, and no fur wrapped covers, unless it's a bunny book!). They like all levels of art, all different kinds of art, you just have to find that special match."

Advanced

Look at a lot of high-quality picture books, and you will see that the illustrations have a number of things in common.

The illustrations usually include close-ups, middle-distance and distant views, and show a variety of scenes. They may use unusual viewpoints, like birds-eye or "worms-eye" views. The variety of the pictures helps keep the book interesting; a story set in a single room might seem wonderful in a [running manuscript](#), but the illustrations could be monotonous!

As you're working on the sketches for the dummy, be sure to leave room for your text. Cut the text up and tack it on to each page of the rough dummy with repositionable tape or adhesive. Then, as you work on the sketches, you can move the text around until you find the best place for it against the illustrations. If you have a very busy full-page illustration, the text may be illegible against the background. You can either have no text on that page, or find a way to include an area of solid color or white, against which the text will stand out.

The movement in the illustrations goes to the right, pulling the reader toward the page turn. As Katie Davis says, you can increase the drama by using the page turns in your pacing. A page turn can be the punch-line of a joke, or a big surprise.

Important parts of the illustration should not be drawn too close to the [gutter](#), the valley between facing pages. Double-spread illustrations that need to line up from one page to the other might not align perfectly in the middle, so bear that in mind when you think about the connection between left-hand and right-hand pages. In a 32-page picture book, pages 16 and 17 are a single sheet of paper with stitching down the middle, right in the center of the book. This is a great place for a double spread; it's the only place where nothing will get lost in the gutter. In a typical 32-page picture book, made up of two "signatures," pages 8 – 9 and 24 – 25 will be a single sheet of paper with stitching down the center. These are great places for double spreads, because nothing can get lost in the gutter here.

The rhythm of the story needs to be spaced out over the whole book; make sure that you don't have some pages with a lot of text and some with very little unless this is deliberately part of the plan of your book. (For instance, Maurice Sendak's classic [Where the Wild Things Are](#) has no text in the central Wild Rumpus scene). The editor will work with you on determining page breaks in the final book, but give this a lot of thought as you plan your dummy.

Submissions

Along with the dummy, submit a running manuscript in standard format, and between one and three highest-quality samples of the finished artwork. Some houses request only one sample, but

most of the editors and agents I talked to said they'd like to see two or three. Never submit any original art.

Steven Malk points out that even with all this material, a good cover letter is still essential. He says that you should be able to describe your project in a concise, interesting manner and also give the agent/publisher the impression that you're familiar with the market and that you know where your book fits in. If you're submitting to an agent, include a brief bio. It should be evident that a lot of time and thought went into your submission; make your presentation as impressive as possible to communicate the fact that you're reliable and professional.

Sometimes people bind the finished art into their dummies but it's better to submit them separately so that the editor can keep the art samples on file if she likes them. Be sure to put complete contact information on each art sample as well as on the dummy. Things can get lost or separated.

I have heard a lot of discussions among writer/illustrators about whether to submit a dummy/ms/sample package to an editor or to an art director. The consensus among the Yellapalooza group is that it's best to submit to editors, since they have the power to acquire books. Submitting a dummy to an art director will show her that you know how to put a story together and it may help you get work illustrating someone else's story, but your book may not get passed on to the editorial department. An editor may want to keep your art samples on file if she likes them; mention in your cover letter whether you're willing to have the art and manuscript considered separately.

Different editors have different opinions about receiving dummy packages from writer/illustrators. John Rudolph, editor at G. P. Putnam's Sons*, prefers to make his decisions based solely on the story. He doesn't want to see a dummy or any art at all until he has accepted a manuscript. On the other hand, Dianne Hess, executive editor of Scholastic Press*, loves to get dummies even when the author is not a trained artist. She likes to see how the story will flow in the 32-page format.

Not all children's book agents represent picture books, but most make an exception for writer/illustrators. Many editors, too, are on the lookout for talented writer/illustrators. Editor Julie Strauss-Gabel says "I receive very few dummy/ms/illustration packages. At the most, I get about one a month, but usually just one every other month. Of these limited submissions, only a very few might warrant serious enough consideration to be shown to colleagues, etc.

"Unfortunately, one component--art or text—is often not up to the level of the other. Usually it is the art that is not of professional quality. I need to see that the project succeeds on all levels. Is the art of high quality, well executed, vivid, accomplished? Is the story solid and original? Are the characters compelling? Is there a particular finesse in the visual storytelling as well as in the word choice?

"But I'd love to see more work from author/illustrators. We're always looking for new author/illustrator talent and, as stated above, get very little. Even if you're still getting your

footing as a writer, I'd love to see innovative, visually-driven projects from highly-skilled illustrators.

"As I look at a project, I notice the art first. I usually get a strong first impression of the quality of the art and whether I think it could compete in today's picture book market. Once I'm interested in the overall style, I'll pay attention to the manuscript/story next and then look to see if the author/illustrator brings visual sophistication to the telling of the story. Is there variation in the perspective? Are the characters engaging? Is the craft of the illustrations of high quality? Is there something extra in the illustrations that really brings out the story? Is it a simple manuscript that's artfully taken to the next level by the illustrations?"

In the case of houses that are open only to queries, get their guidelines. If they don't mention picture books written and illustrated by the same person, submit a standard picture book query letter with one high-quality illustration sample. The submission requirements vary from house to house, so find out as much as you can prior to submission.

-S.B.