

Power Revision: The Art (and the Pain) of Writing and Revising

by Brenda Shannon Yee

You've written a story and you love it. You're ready to lick the [stamps](#) and send your work to the open arms of an editor. Stop! Before you submit, use the guide below to [check](#) your manuscript.

Some basics:

- Does your story have an attention-grabbing beginning? An interesting middle that moves the story toward the climax? A satisfying ending?
- Is the beginning of your manuscript truly the beginning of the story?
- Is the main character appealing? Can the target age group identify with the character or find her interesting?
- Is there a conflict or problem for the main character to resolve?
- Does suspense build toward the climax?
- Does the character solve the problem herself? Does the solution make sense? Is the solution creative? Humorous?
- Does the dialog sound natural and fit the character? Does it move the plot forward?
- Does every word, line and paragraph move the story along?

A critique group can be very useful in helping you spot flaws in these areas. If the main character isn't appealing, or the plot is nonexistent, or the conflict is somehow resolved "magically" without action on the part of the protagonist, your story has major problems. Fix them.

Power Revision

Now you're ready for what I call power revision. But don't be misled by the word "power." Think of the following list as seasonings-salt and pepper, herbs and spices-that make a good, solid story flavorful and pleasing to the ear and tongue. Here is where you add depth and style to your work.

A) VERBS Verbs are workhorses. The right one conveys not only what was done, but also how it was accomplished, lending a sense of motion, mood, and personality. Does your character: Eat -or- chomp, chew, bite, nibble? Walk -or- stroll, amble, race, tippie-toe? Look -or- stare, glare, glance, search? Talk** -or- shout, whisper, mumble, grumble? Pull -or- drag, tug, yank, [hoist](#)? Power verbs are accurate portrayals of specific action within your story. Review your verbs. Use your thesaurus. Don't be satisfied with one word if another better conveys the action of your character. **In picture books, the verb "said" is commonly used in dialogue. But when the situation calls for it, try a power verb and see if it works.

B) SENSORY DETAILS Use words and images that appeal to senses other than sight. We "see" much in our stories. But how about hearing, touch, taste, and smell? Review your manuscript and see if you can substitute a word or line that appeals to the reader in ways other than sight. Let the protagonist smell the food, touch the rock, taste the salty ocean water.

C) RHYTHM Not every picture book should rhyme. But every picture book manuscript should have rhythm. From my first picture book, SAND CASTLE: The castle rose high/ The moat dipped deep/ The path flowed long/ The wall stood strong/ The road lay wide and welcoming. Rhythm comes from the beat of the words (accented syllables). Lines 1-4 share the pattern of their accents or emphasis: The CASTle rose HIGH/ The MOAT dipped DEEP/The PATH flowed LONG/The WALL stood STRONG The three middle lines (about the moat, path, and wall) each have four syllables, with the last two words in each line sharing letter sounds: "dipped deep" (alliteration); "flowed long" (vowel sound of "o"); "stood strong" (alliteration). The four-word pattern is altered in the eight-syllable 5th line, but it contains the alliteration of "wide" and "welcoming." Adding rhythm, plus a judicious touch of alliteration or common vowel sounds, can turn ordinary language into verbal music. Read your work aloud. Listen carefully.

D) Vary sentence length and rhythm. Nothing puts a reader to sleep faster than a monotonous, sing-song rhythm or sentence after sentence of the same length. Keep your reader's attention. Use a combination of longer and shorter sentences. It works. FINAL TOUCHES THAT MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

- Are the grammar and spelling perfect? Don't rely on a word-processing spell check program. They are notorious for homonym confusion. If you're not sure about a word or phrase, look it up in a dictionary or have someone proficient in grammar and punctuation review your manuscript. Twisted grammar and poor spelling are unprofessional and distracting. It's not the editor's job to teach you the basics of writing.
- Is your manuscript formatted properly? Clean, readable, double-spaced on one side of the paper? You don't need expensive bond paper, but smudgy print with crossed-out words is unprofessional.

Revising your work can be painful, but there's an art to it as well. Stretch your writing muscles and have fun. Consider this: the next time you read a great story with wonderful writing--was the writing great when words were first set on paper or was the great writing a result of skillful revision? To learn more about revising (and there's lots to learn!) refer to the following resources:

HOW TO WRITE A CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOK AND GET IT PUBLISHED by Barbara Seuling. Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1991.

HOW TO WRITE AND SELL CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS by Jean E. Karl. Writer's Digest Books, 1994.

WRITING FOR CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS by Lee Wyndham (Revised by Arnold Madison). Writer's Digest Books, 1994.

When Those Rejections Keep Coming

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If you've submitted a manuscript 5-6 times and you're receiving only anonymous rejections (with no personal comments from an editor), that could mean:

A) You're submitting to the wrong publishers. You need to do your market research. Consult publications specific to children's writing:

- Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market book from Writer's Digest (the 2000 edition is now available);
- SCBWI market survey (updated every August);
- Newsletters and publications specific to children's writing (The SCBWI Bulletin, Children's Book Insider, Children's Writer, etc.) Keep up to date on editors and publisher needs.

B) Your story has major flaws:

- Weak writing;
- Flawed or no plot;
- Didactic (hitting the reader over the head with a moral or lesson);
- Common story or characters.

Don't despair! Cast a critical eye on your story. Fix problems if you can. If you can't, put that manuscript in a drawer and view it as a foundation brick in your path to better writing. Keep learning, and try again.

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