

Seventeen Minds Trying to Catch Up With One: A Checklist to Help Us Critique Our Own Manuscripts

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Note: In the first workshop I took with Jane Yolen these are the comments and questions that came up over and over as she helped us with our manuscripts. At the end of the workshop the seventeen of us sat down together and made this list. You may find it helpful [to apply](#) them to your own work.

THE MOST COMMON PROBLEMS: WATCH OUT FOR THESE!

- Do the children have power in their own behalf?
- Do they solve their own problems?
- Does the story really start where it starts?
- Are the problems solved too easily?
- Is the point of view consistent?
- Have you tried to do half a dozen things in one story?
- Have you used cliches rather than sharp language?
- Does the story say what you want it to say?
- Have you done too much describing and narrating rather than using action and dialogue?
- Show me, don't tell me!
- Does everything in the story work or is it cluttered with unnecessary details?
- Are your characters solid?

SUGGESTIONS:

Read your story aloud, into a [tape recorder](#) if possible, and listen carefully for things that don't work.

Instead of asking, "Is this good enough?", ask, "Is there any way this can possibly be made better?"

"Children's books change lives. Stories pour into the hearts of children and help make them what they become." -Jane Yolen

GENERAL THINGS TO CONSIDER:

- Does your story have a theme?
- Note: The theme is what your book is about. Plot is how you get there.
- Does the story fit the format or type of book you are writing?
- Is it appropriate for the age level?
- Is the way you are telling the story related to what you have to say?
- Does your story have something new to say or does it say something old with a fresh viewpoint or in a new way? You need the eyes and ears of the child, coming fresh to things.
- Does it have the kind of toughness that children have and need, or is it sweet and sappy?
- Children have to overcome a lot because everything is harder for them.
- Does it have sentiment (heart) or just sentimentality?
- Are you being condescending, talking down to the child?
- Are you unconsciously trying to do more than one story at the same time?

Are you mixing two or more different styles?
 Are you mixing a [realistic story](#) and fantasy?
 Are you mixing expository non-fiction and an emotional story?
 Are you trying to cover too long a time span or too much material in one book?
 Do you let your story carry itself or do you try to teach?
 Does everything in the book ultimately focus on the same point and work on all levels?
 No red herrings except in mysteries.

STYLE:

Have you used language economically?
 Is the story told in a simple, direct way or is it cluttered with things that don't work?
 Are you comfortable with the language?
 Are you fluent enough with the style to use it well?
 Does the style match the material?
 Have you used cliches or good, crisp images?
 Avoid the predictable.
 Is your language sharp, creating clear images? i.e.: Use shuffle, tiptoe or stomp rather than walk.
 Have you used good, strong nouns and verbs and avoided superfluous adjectives?
 If you have two adjectives, take one out and think very seriously about the other one.
 Have you repeated something unnecessarily?
 If you have shown something through action or dialogue, you don't also have to describe it.
 Do you over-use particular words and phrases? i.e.: he said, she said.
 Have you used vivid sensory words and images throughout your story?
 Do you have a variety of sentence lengths and structures?
 Do you over-use "ing" words? i.e.: Told is stronger than was telling.
 Do the transitions from one thought or event to the next work or are they jarring?
 Do you use narration where dialogue and action would carry your story better?

POINT OF VIEW:

Have you chosen the best point of view for this story? If it's concerned with the emotions of one particular character, try first person. If you need the descriptions and information that first person forces you to leave out, stick to third.

CHARACTERIZATION:

Does the language of a character help reveal something about him or her?
 Is it appropriate and consistent throughout?
 Have you given the character any words he or she would not use?
 Are all the characters in the story necessary?
 Are they all developed as much as they need to be?
 Are your characters solid and full-bodied?
 Do you really know them?
 Even in simple stories, have you given the reader a way to identify them?
 Have you revealed them to the reader through the use of
 ... physical appearance? No mirrors, please!
 gesture and mannerisms?
 dress?

actions and reactions?

dialogue?

Are they stereotypes?

Are the names just exactly right?

Is your villain, if there is one, as strong and real as your hero?

Does the main character grow or change through the course of the story?

Have you kept introspection to a minimum and shown the emotions through the actions, reactions and dialogue that keep the story moving?

Is there an emotional range with high highs and low lows or just a boring gray?

PLOT:

Do you have a plot or just a series of incidents?

Do you get your character up the tree so he has to come back down, or does he just come to the tree and walk away without anything really happening?

Does the plot build appropriately or just meander?

What is the problem to be solved or explored in the book?

Do you get right to it in the beginning?

Do you begin at the beginning? Start with the action?

Does the story keep alive with the suspense, the curiosity to know what happened next?

Do you have cliff hangers at the ends of the first few chapters to get the reader hooked into reading further?

Does the child face and solve, or at least help to solve, his own problem?

FANTASY:

Do you believe in it yourself?

Does it have its own logic and have you followed it consistently?

If there is magic, does it have consequences? Is it tough magic?

Does the hero have honesty, courage, goodness and love?

Is his problem or foe big and tough and evil?

Is there a sense of justice?

Does the hero have to make fateful, heart wrenching decisions?

Does it have an appropriate style?

Is it poetic where it needs to be poetic?

Does it have the feeling of the old high language, if it's that sort of tale?

Does it make use of word plays, puns and jokes?

REALISTIC NOVELS:

Is your story based on an emotional involvement rather than a "hot subject"?

Do you really deal with the character and not just the problem?

Do you offer some direction or ray of hope or just expose a problem, rubbing the wounds raw?

Would you feel comfortable with your own young child reading the book?

If not, can you change it so that you would be and still have it work?

NON-FICTION:

Does the book open the child to something new or tell him something he or she vitally wants to know?

Is it accurate?

Is it clear? i.e.: without jargon or terminal cute-less.

Is it complete within the realm of what you're trying to do?

Is it written with movement, style and wit?

Does it speak to the child's sense of wonder rather than being pedantic?

Does it lead the child on to other discoveries?

PICTURE BOOKS:

Does the story deal with one simple concept or story line?

Are there enough and appropriately spaced visual images to illustrate?

Will it fit into the format of a 32-page book?

Is the language bare-boned and economical but still full of style?

SCBWI-MI thanks Anna for allowing us to reprint her article at our website. To read more of her articles – and learn more about Anna and her books, visit her website at www.aghines.com/.