

Kid Lit 101

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Want to write for kids? If you're used to the norms of the adult publishing landscape, moving into children's literature requires understanding a whole different set of rules. Here's what you need to know to get started.

PICTURE BOOKS

Picture books are highly illustrated stories for children and adults to read together. This category covers everything from board books for babies and toddlers all the way up to stories of 1,000 words or more that will hold the attention of seven or eight year olds. The words and art should be full partners in storytelling, rather than the illustrations re-stating information already present in the text.

Ages 0-3: board books under 50 words

Ages 2-5: read by an adult, pictures do most of the storytelling, under 400 words

Ages 4-8: standard format is 32 pages, average 500 to 600 words.

Publishing

Large publishers make up most of the picture book market, and it is an extremely profitable market segment for them. However, there are more and more small publishers specializing in picture books. Though there are plenty of published picture books that are over 1,000 words or rhyme, these are usually by established authors. Most agents and editors open to debut authors are looking for non-rhyming texts under 600 words.

Challenges

Many inexperienced writers think picture books are "easy", so agents and editors are often swamped with low-quality submissions and it can be difficult to get noticed in the slush pile. Marketing a self-published picture book can be especially challenging.

Advantages

Picture books are highly sought after by libraries and make great birthday and holiday gifts, so sales are strong. Author-illustrators are especially desirable to agents and publishers as long as the illustrations are of professional quality. Authors who don't illustrate do not need to find an artist; the publisher will want to choose their own.

CHAPTER BOOKS

Chapter books provide a transition for children who have outgrown picture books, but aren't yet ready for full novels. They might be aimed at kids who are learning to read independently, or be designed for an adult to read with a child who is ready for a longer or more complex story than a picture book typically provides. They are always illustrated, but might not have an illustration on every page, or the illustration might take up only part of the page. They might divide a longer story into short chapters, or each chapter might tell a new story about the same characters. Themes usually focus more on plot than on a character growth arc.

Ages 6-8: easy readers 2,000-10,000 words

Ages 8-11 essentially short and simple novels. 10,000-25,000 words

Publishing

Chapter books are nearly always published as a series. It is typical to finish writing more than one book before pursuing publication so the series can be pitched to a publisher as a set.

Challenges

It can be difficult to find agents and editors actively seeking chapter book series, especially if the author has no other publication history. Many chapter book series come from established picture book or middle grade authors.

Advantages

If readers like the first book, they are likely to be devoted fans who will collect each book in the series as it comes out.

MIDDLE GRADE

Novels for children ages 8-13. These are a step up from chapter books in reading difficulty, as well as depth of story and character development. Middle grade novels usually revolve around themes of establishing a personal identity within the framework of family and social roles, with plot points supporting this character growth arc. Few, if any, illustrations.

Ages 8-10: lower middle grade, with characters in elementary school. 20,000-50,000 words.

Ages 11-13: upper middle grade, with characters in middle school. 35,000-65,000 words is typical, but especially in fantasy or science fiction can reach 90,000 words or more.

Publishing

Middle grade books are a thriving segment of the publishing landscape. While picture books and young adult are fairly saturated, middle grade is seeing incredible growth and diversity, and there is plenty of room for debut authors in the marketplace.

Challenges

Middle grade readers are old enough that they want to choose their own reading, but young enough that they can't always access bookstores and libraries without help. This creates some unique marketing challenges for middle grade authors. Recommendations from teachers and librarians, as well as word of mouth from their peers, are often determining factors in which books kids decide to try.

Advantages

Kids in this age range can be voracious readers, and are often willing to try new genres and read about characters with very different experiences than their own. Middle grade books of any genre can succeed: contemporary, historical, horror, mystery, humor, fantasy, science fiction, or any blend of these.

YOUNG ADULT

Novels for teenagers. Young adult novels may or may not have a higher wordcount than middle grade novels, but will have older characters tackling more complex problems. They usually revolve around themes of developing a personal identity independent from previous family and societal roles. Young adult novels do not typically have illustrations.

Ages 14-17: characters are in high school. 40,000-90,000 words or more

Publishing

Querying and marketing for young adult books is basically the same as in the adult market. Self published books with a good marketing plan have room to succeed in a way that would be more challenging for younger Kid Lit categories.

Challenges

After a boom in popularity among adult readers in the early 2000s, young adult novels have become an oversaturated segment of the publishing market. Successful books sell well, but it can be difficult to stand out in the crowd.

Advantages

While young adult stories should be geared toward teenage readers, many adults enjoy them as well, which increases potential readership. Young adult books are more likely to be adapted for film and television than any of the younger Kid Lit categories.

GRAPHIC NOVELS

Stories for any of the previously mentioned age ranges can be formatted as graphic novels. Even mainstream picture books are showing increasing stylistic similarities to comics, with dialogue in speech bubbles incorporated into the illustrations rather than as part of a separate narrative text block.

THE KEYS TO SUCCESS

- **Respect your reader.** Too often, authors make the mistake of writing AT children instead of FOR children. Rather than deciding as an adult what moral you want to teach or what content is "appropriate" for children, approach the story from a kid's perspective and focus on what is RELEVANT to children. Kids have an innate sense of justice, fairness, kindness, bravery, and clever wit. Write stories that make them feel seen and heard, reinforcing something they already know to be true, rather than trying to teach a lesson. Kids can smell a lecture a mile away.
- **Bring your A Game.** Don't make the mistake of thinking Kid Lit is easier than writing for adults, or that kids don't know what quality writing looks like. Children are the most discerning readers in the world—if they're not enjoying a book, they will drop it immediately and move on to something they do enjoy. Packing a complete and satisfying story into such a small footprint leaves no room for error. A lower word count means every word counts.
- **Do your research.** Everybody was a kid once, but that doesn't mean you understand what it's like to be a kid right now. Today's kids aren't likely to have names like John and Susan. Their dialogue probably sounds different than the way you would speak, or the way Kid Lit characters spoke in decades past. Today's kids are incredibly technologically savvy. Their families and communities are more diverse than ever. If you want to write stories that resonate with children, you've got to understand what their lives are actually like, rather than how you imagine them to be.

Publishing industry norms and trends update just as culture does. Favorite titles from your own childhood, or books you enjoyed reading to the children in your life, may not reflect the current Kid Lit landscape. Read lots of recent publications (from the

last five years) in the category you intend to write to get a feel for what's overdone, what's new and fresh, and what readers and publishers are looking for.