



MODULE 1 – The ‘Big Picture’ of Picture Books

What is a Picture Book?

Let's begin by clarifying some terms. This is a course in writing picture books for children. "Picture Book" is a very specific genre in the children's book industry, and its name is frequently misunderstood or misinterpreted.

Many aspiring children's book authors think that if a book has, or is intended to have, 'pictures', it is therefore a 'picture book'. But if a book has chapters, even if there are illustrations, it is *not* a picture book – it is a "chapter book," intended for children between the ages of 7 and 10. And if a book is made of heavy duty, laminated cardboard and has 4-8 double page spreads with pictures and very little text, that is not a picture book – it is a "board book," which is specific to babies and toddlers.

Picture Books are intended for **children from pre-school through 4th grade**, or roughly ages 2 – 8, with the "sweet spot" being 3-5. They are typically **1000 words or less** (often much less), **32 pages in length** and feature prominent illustrations that tell as much of the story as the text does.

You do not have to be an illustrator to write picture books – many picture book authors write text only, and their books are illustrated separately. But if you are not an author/illustrator and you write the story only, it will be up to your publisher to pair you with an illustrator (unless you are self-publishing... more on this later.)

Aspiring authors often think that picture books are easier to write than chapter books or novels. In fact, picture books may be among the hardest to write *well*, because they require brevity, clarity, a strong visual sense and a keen understanding of action. (My publisher says, "It's easy to write a *bad* picture book. I know because I read dozens of them every week. Writing a *good* picture book is a rare achievement!")

Picture books are indeed challenging to write, but when well-written they are a joy to read – for children, *and* the adults who read with them.

Picture Book Format

A picture book is:

- Intended for children from pre-school - 4th grade, or roughly ages 0 – 8, with the “sweet spot” being 2-5.
- Designed to be *read to or with* the child, rather than for the child to read to him or herself.

A picture book has:

- 32 pages, divided into 16 double-page spreads, featuring either a minimal amount of text and prominent art, or a balance between the two.
- 0 – 1000 words max, with 500 or less being optimal in today’s market.
- Illustrations on every page (or every facing page.) Art may be full color, black and white, or a combination, but it complements and furthers (rather than just reflects) the story.
- A simple plot and a limited number of characters, with a child or child-like protagonist at its center, who is trying to solve a problem or achieve a goal.

A picture book can be:

- Written in prose, verse, or wordless (meaning art only, i.e. *Good Dog, Carl*, *Goodnight Gorilla*, *The Lion and the Mouse* or *A Ball for Daisy*.)
- Fiction, Non-Fiction (How-to, educational, memoir), or “Concept” (i.e. an illustrated poem or song, ABC, counting, or I Spy books)

A picture book does not have:

- Chapters – these fall under the category of early reader, chapter book or novel, depending on the length.
- More than 1000 words (with some exceptions, especially older, “classic” picture books, such as *Make Way for Ducklings*)
- Less than 32 pages (or more than 48 pages, in the case of certain classics)
- More than a 2-5 key characters
- Complicated plots or sub-plots.
- Adult Protagonists (with the exception of fables and fairy tales, and child-like adult characters like Amelia Bedelia.)

A picture book should not be:

Long-winded, overly descriptive, corny, sentimental, didactic, preachy, cutesy, condescending to kids in any way or more “talky” than active.

Picture Book Structure

For the purposes of this course, we will be focusing on **fiction-based** picture books – that is, picture books that are character-driven and tell a fictional story with a beginning, middle and end. But many of the same rules for fictional picture books also apply to narrative non-fiction or concept books, so for those interested in that form there will be quite a bit of cross-over.

We will be studying this in much greater detail over the coming weeks, but let's take a very preliminary look at the structure of a typical picture book:

Beginning – in which we **meet the central character** or characters and **discover what problem they have** which must be solved, or what their need or goal is.

Middle – in which **the problem escalates**, dramatic tension builds and we wonder what will happen to our hero.

End – in which **the problem is solved or resolved** - usually as the result of the hero's *own* initiative or actions, as opposed to the interference of a wise elder or outside force - perhaps in an unexpected way, and the character or **characters have grown or changed** as a result.

Of course, rules are made to be broken - and there are always exceptions to everything. You can, for example, find a picture book without a problem to be solved at the center of the story, but these are usually either 'concept' books or there is some other device to engage the reader and keep them turning the pages, such as an "origin story" or "a day in the life of..." a familiar character.

In general, the rules you will learn in this course will never let you down when writing for children. Once you have fully mastered them, feel free to experiment with breaking them. But start with the knowledge base. Apply the core principles first, and you can't go wrong.

About Illustrations

This course is focused on the writing of the text, or story, only. And as mentioned previously, unless you are specifically an author/illustrator, *you are not expected to come up with the illustrations for your picture book manuscript.*

Art comes later – after the manuscript has been accepted for publication. This means that, unless you are an author/illustrator, you will not be submitting your

manuscript for publication consideration with illustrations attached, nor should you even consider pairing up with an illustrator yourself.

When it comes to picture books, publishers consider it their job to match the text/author with the right art/illustrator. It is very much part of their process to identify the best possible illustrator for a project, and to work closely with that illustrator (as well as the author) when it comes to layout, artwork etc. Authors who pair up with illustrators and then try to submit their books as package deals invariably find their projects rejected for this reason.

That said, illustrations tell as much, if not more, of the story in a picture book as the text does, so it's essential that picture book authors learn to think visually when writing. More on this as the course unfolds. Of course, if you are planning to self-publish, then you are the publisher as well as the author – so you will be identifying your own illustrator when the time comes. But for now, focus on the text and on the story itself.

MODULE 1 – Assignment

Please acquire and study the following picture books. They should be readily available at your local library or bookstore. Some are older, some more contemporary. (**If you are in a location where it is difficult to obtain any of these books, please see my note below*):

Olivia by Ian Falconer
Knuffle Bunny by Mo Willems
Owen by Kevin Henkes
Extra Yarn, by Mac Barnett, illustrated by Jon Klassen
Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak
Whistle for Willie by Ezra Jack Keats

Compare and contrast the books, utilizing the downloadable worksheets

** **A Note on the Books:** If you live somewhere that makes it difficult or impossible to obtain any of these books, there are videos of all of them being read aloud by various different people on YouTube. Of course it's always best to see, hold and read the actual book, but this is a free alternative option. Simply log onto www.YouTube.com and type the name of the book and author into the search bar. Where there is more than one choice or reading, experiment to see which one you like best. Most of them are read by elementary school teachers, and may not be officially authorized – therefore I cannot specifically endorse any one of them directly.*