**You Can Write for Children**

**with Chris Eboch,**

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**The Parts of an Article or Story for Children.**

* A catchy **title**. The best titles hint at the genre or subject matter.
* A dramatic **beginning**, with a hook. A good beginning:

grabs the reader’s attention with action, dialogue, or a hint of drama to come

sets the scene

indicates the genre and tone (in fiction) or the article type (in nonfiction)

has voice (appealing style)

* A solid **middle**, which moves the story forward or fulfills the goal of the article.

Fiction should focus on plot that builds to a climax, and character development, ideally involving a change in the character as he/she learns the lesson of the story.

An article should focus on information directly related to the main topic. It should be organized in a logical way, with transitions between subtopics. The tone should be friendly and lively, not lecturing. Unfamiliar words should be defined within the text, or in a sidebar.

* A satisfying **ending** that wraps up the story or closes the article. Endings may circle back to the beginning, repeating an idea or scene, but showing change. The message should be clear here, but not preachy. What did the character learn?
* Bonus material: An article or even a story may use sidebars, crafts, recipes, photos, etc. to provide more value. For nonfiction, include a bibliography with several reliable sources.

**Turn your idea into a plot.**

Ask, why is this goal important to the character? The stakes should be high.

Ask, why is this goal difficult for the character?

Brainstorm. Freewrite (stream of consciousness) for 10 minutes. Break, do again.

Mull over the possibilities for a few days

Outline. Use the plot questionnaire. Brainstorm ways to fill in the blanks.

Or just start writing. Revise later. Write whatever scene is strong in your mind, even if you’re “not there yet.”

**Reading Level**

Microsoft Word: Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level - Search for "display readability statistics" in the Help menu.

LEXILE <http://www.lexile.com/> (You sign up but it's free.)

Lexile w/word highlights: <http://www.lextutor.ca/vp/eng/>

And ATOS for Books analyzer: <http://www.renlearn.com/atos/analyze.aspx?type=1> (also free)

*Children's Writer's Word Book*

**Character and conflict:** Start with the character’s goal. The conflict must be important enough, and not too easy to solve. This will vary by story length and age group. Ask:

* Why is it important?
* Why is it difficult?

General categories are man vs. man (or group/society), man vs. nature, man vs. himself (physical/mental/emotional weaknesses).

**Six basic human needs influence character:**

Security (safety, knowing the future)

Change (desire for variety, excitement)

Connection (feeling part of a group)

Independence (personal identity and freedom)

Growth (working toward a personal goal)

Contribution (feeling needed, worthwhile)

*Create conflict by setting up situations which oppose a person’s needs.*

**Additional notes on Building Characters**

* Heroes should be realistic, complex and individual.—Make sure your heroes have flaws. Characters should have a mix of traits, good and bad, sometimes working against each other (e.g. bright but undisciplined). Even the people you love have flaws and irritating quirks. So should your characters. Think of unusual/contradictory qualities, (tough bully who loves roses).
* Heroes should have universal traits (emotions and motives). Readers should identify/sympathize to some extent, so they’ll forgive the main character for their mistakes.
* Your hero should have the qualities needed to realistically overcome the challenge. Thus, the challenges should be hard enough to be dramatic (we must believe the hero could fail), yet not so great that no real person could solve them.
* In general, the protagonist should grow and change in the course of the story. She should make errors, and learn something. Heroes need both inner and outer challenges.
* Protagonists should be active, not passive. They should take risks and responsibility. They may be at least partly responsible for their own problems. They should have to sacrifice something in order to succeed (pride, safety, financial security)
* Heroes may be willing or unwilling. They may be outcasts, cynics, loners, wounded or reluctant. But at some point they should commit to the challenge.
* Your hero’s rewards should be proportionate to the challenges.

Villains should also be well-rounded. A villain with good qualities and understandable motives creates a more subtle and complex story. Why is the villain nasty? Are they actually evil, or ignorant, or do their goals just conflict with your hero’s?

Other major characters also need strengths and weaknesses. Think about their motives, their good qualities and their flaws.

**Plotting**

A plot has four main parts:

Situation—something difficult for the main character.

Complication—the main character’s actions should make the situation worse at first.

Climax—finally, the main character must succeed or fail. This is the last chance.

Resolution—generally, the main character should resolve the situation. May be happy or unhappy.

**Plotting Questionnaire:**

Who is the main character?

Who or what is the antagonist?

Who are the other people in the story?

What does the main character want? (problem, goal, greatest need)

Why is this important? (It should be vital to that character.)

How does the antagonist prevent the main character from reaching his/her goal?

What does the main character do about this?

What are the results? (Things should get worse, the problem more difficult.)

[Repeat the last two several times]

What crisis finally results?

What is the climax? (Moment of decision.)

What is the resolution? Is the goal accomplished, or abandoned in favor of something else, or lost?

What is the theme?

**Testing the Idea—what happens if you:**

Change the character’s age, sex, or looks

Change the point of view

Change the setting

Change the external conflict

Change the internal conflict

**What works best?**

Homework: draft a short story or article, or begin outlining a novel or work on a synopsis. (You do not need to turn in this homework.)