

**FROM**

**PROMISING**

**TO**

**POLISHED**

**USE THESE REVISION TIPS  
TO MAKE YOUR  
PICTURE BOOK MANUSCRIPT  
IRRESISTIBLE.**

**BY ANICA MROSE RISSI**

## SO, YOU'VE WRITTEN A PICTURE BOOK MANUSCRIPT: CONGRATULATIONS! NOW IT'S TIME TO REVISE, REVISE, REVISE, AND REVISE SOME MORE. BUT WHERE TO START?

The best picture-book texts entertain and delight children, hold up to multiple readings, and make use of elements unique to the format, such as frequent page turns and visual storytelling. A good picture book can make writing one look easy, but of course it is anything but. Whether you're a picture-book pro or brand new to the genre, here are some tips, tricks, questions, and approaches to keep in mind as you play and experiment with your draft.

### Cut, cut, cut

Many beloved classic picture books have upwards of 1,000 or even 2,000 words, but in today's picture book market, your manuscript is more likely to sell if the word count falls within the 400- to 800-word range. Like every rule in publishing, there are exceptions, of course – but one of the joys of writing picture books is finding and using exactly the right words, and *only* those words. Challenge yourself to tell the story as economically as possible. Simplify where you can, and choose words that are vivid and impactful.

### Leave room for the visual story

The words in a picture book tell only half the tale, at most. As you revise your manuscript, ask yourself: Are there pieces of the story (descriptions, actions, moods) you're currently including that could be told in the pictures instead? If yes, consider cutting them. A strong picture book text leaves lots of space for the illustrator to get creative.

**Bonus tip:** Keep art notes sparse, including only those details that aren't obvious in the text but are absolutely

necessary to the story. Trust your future illustrator and leave room for her to expand the story in ways you might never have imagined.

### Rhyme for a reason

Time after time, we see picture books that rhyme, and that's fine (see what I did there?), but in the current market, most picture-book editors prefer non-rhyming manuscripts, unless the rhymes are especially clever and inventive, or employed for a specific reason important to the story. If you've written your draft in rhyme, ask yourself: Are the rhymes necessary? Have you used rhymes in place of either plot or emotional stakes? Are the rhymes you've chosen truly fresh and unexpected? Try rewriting the manuscript without rhyming – or using rhymes only in select moments, such as for humor, surprise, or emphasis – to test whether the story can (or perhaps should) stand without them.

### Repeat with care

Repetition is a useful device in the picture book writer's toolbox. It can be used not only for humor, rhythm, and comfort, but also for building expectations in the mind of the reader or toppling them. It also can get annoying. Employ repetition well and wisely, but don't overuse it. Like with rhyming, you might be overusing repetition if your story wouldn't work at all without it.

### Use those page breaks

Picture book writers often think in "spreads:" sets of two facing pages that, as the book is read, will be viewed simultaneously. Each spread should ideally build toward the climax and the eventual resolution of the plot. Do all of yours? (One way to test this is by asking yourself, "what's *new* in this spread?") Consider, too, how the page turn – a built-in pause and moment of anticipation between each spread –

might be used for humor or to build tension or suspense.

### Raise the emotional stakes

Most great picture books don't merely entertain and tell a good story; they also pack an emotional punch. Does your story contain something for the kid reader to care about, relate to, or root for? What are the emotional stakes related to your plot, and how can you augment those even further?

### Build expectations...then subvert them

From page one of your book, where might readers expect the story to go? (Yes, the first page *should* contain some hint of this.) How can you build those expectations and then top, twist, or subvert them?

### Read, read, read

Picture books are meant to be read aloud, so read your draft to someone else. Read it to your pet. Read it to a friend. Then ask a friend to read it to you (or, in a pinch, use computer dictation to read it out loud). Are there sentences your tongue trips over? Do the rhythm and pacing still sound and feel as right as they did in your head? Reading and hearing the draft out loud will help you identify beats and lines that aren't working – and also which ones are.

### Hide it in a drawer

Feeling good about your revised draft? Terrific! Now put it in a drawer (or close the document), walk away, and forget about it. Yes, really. Don't even *think* about those words or that story for at least a week, preferably longer. Once you've stayed away from the manuscript for enough time that you can no longer recite the words on the page, return to it with fresh eyes and revise, revise again. **W**

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