

Dear Aspiring Children's Book Author,

First of all, my apologies for this form letter, but it's the only way I can find to respond to all the people who have asked me for information about writing for children.

Since I have had some children's books published, you have asked for suggestions and resources that I've found helpful. Here goes:

First of all, you'll need PERSEVERANCE and PATIENCE.

You have to hang in there and never, ever give up. It took me 13 years of writing for children before I had my first children's book (*Pigs in the Mud in the Middle of the Road*) published in 1997. I collected hundreds & hundreds of rejection letters and was tempted to give up several times, but I never did because I truly enjoyed the actual writing and creation—it was as if I made something out of thin air when I wrote a new story. I decided that I'd continue writing for children until the day I died even if I never had anything published. But fortunately, I did and now I've had 28 more children's books published, but you should know that I still get more "no's" on my submissions than "yeses."

Do you need an AGENT?

If you can get one, great. But it's as hard to get an agent as it is to find a publisher. I did NOT have an agent until I had my first book published, and then I found one who still would not take me on as a client until she'd read more of my stories—she wanted to represent a career, not just one book. I love my agent, and "sorry" I won't pass her name along to all of you (she's swamped & not taking on new clients). But for me an agent is easier. She deals with the details, sending out my stories to the right editors, fighting over money issues for me, reading the details of 15 page contracts, etc. She gets 15% of all the book monies I earn (advances, royalties), and I believe she earns every penny of it. Agents CAN get faster responses to manuscripts than people who just send in unsolicited manuscripts. And unfortunately, when I started writing for children over many years ago approximately 75% of all publishing companies took unsolicited manuscripts; now only about 25% do so (the rest only take submissions from agents or published authors or personal referrals). The current issue of *Children's Writers & Illustrator's Market* includes a listing of agents for children's material. Agents will respond to your material—it's best to send 2-3 stories (for picture books) or 3 sample chapters for a chapter book so that an agent can get a good feel for your work. If you've only written one or 2 picture books, then it's probably best not to approach an agent—they are going to want to know that you

have more than 1 or 2 books in you. Also be careful not to send too much material to an agent—their time is limited and you don't want to overwhelm them. They will ask you for more samples of your work if they are interested. (It took me 6 months to get an answer from my agent because she was so busy & her top priority was doing her clients' work—now that she represents me, she always responds to my letters or calls much faster.).

If you can't find an agent, how do you SUBMIT your work?

You send it directly to editors yourself. The best resource I've found is *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market* (you can find it in the writing/reference section of most bookstores) which lists book publishers and magazine editors who consider children's material (there's also a chapter for YOUNG authors and illustrators so that kids can try to get their work published in markets where they don't have to compete with adults). This guidebook lists which editors to send manuscripts to, their addresses, phone numbers, kinds of material they want, whether they accept unsolicited manuscripts or not, etc. You'll want the most recent issue since editors change positions so often; plus lots of publishing companies merge & change. The book includes how to submit manuscripts, including sample letters plus inside stories from authors, editors, agents, etc. My experience has been that it usually takes a minimum of 3 months to hear back from an editor up to a maximum of 18 months! If you don't hear in 4 months, write a follow-up letter. And so you'll need to keep good records of which manuscripts you submit where. Another good way to find possible publishers for your material is to check out children's books at bookstores and see which ones look similar in style to your book, then write down the publishing company and send them your story IF they are accepting manuscripts.

Should you get the picture book that you've written ILLUSTRATED?

No, no, no!!! This belief is the most common misunderstanding in children's books. Publishers do not want you to send in illustrations for your story unless you are going to illustrate it yourself (in that case, you'd better make certain that you are as talented an illustrator as you are a writer and vice versa). If your illustrations would be stick figures (which is the way I illustrate), then don't go ahead and find an illustrator (such as your nephew, neighbor, Uncle Fred, or whoever). Publishers buy stories, and then it's their job to find an appropriate illustrator for each story. Will they give you final say on an illustrator they pick for your story? No. As hard as it is, you have to trust the publishing companies to make the match. (I've been thrilled with the matches they've made for my stories) Even after they tell you who will illustrate your story, you still don't get to talk with the illustrator. All communications usually go through the editor. You'll be shown sketches to give feedback on, but only for true errors (it doesn't matter that the grandmother doesn't look the way your grandmother does). And so, if information is critical to an illustration, then write a

brief note on your manuscript (especially if it's a visual joke that's not obvious with the words); but otherwise, trust and leave the illustrating to the illustrator. Is it possible you might have a book published and you won't like the illustrations in the book? It's possible (anything's possible), but not likely. It's a publishing company's job to create a book that's wonderful in words & images—you just have to trust, that's the hard part (My picture books have turned out better than I ever could have imagined.)

What ADVICE would I give aspiring children's book authors?

#1-Read, read, read. You should be reading hundreds of children's books by other authors if that's what you want to write. Don't worry—you won't copy their ideas or styles, but you will learn what makes a book work and absorb how good writing works.

#2-Keep on writing. Don't write just one story and then anxiously wait to see if it will sell. Write more, lots more. As you create new pieces, you won't be so obsessed with the one that's out to publishers. And if you get a yes, you'll have more to send out to someone who loves your work. Plus the more you write, the better you get. I used to think the stories I wrote 25 years ago were good; and they were the best I could write at that time, but over the years my writing skills have improved and I've learned ways to improve my older stories. In fact, I even had a book published that I'd worked on for nine years. I continued to revise that story and polish it over the years, through many different versions, and lots of rejections, until finally the story was good enough and it found the right home (Your stories may well be good enough—it's just a matter of finding the right home.).

#3-Don't forget about children's magazines. I was stubborn—too stubborn perhaps. I wanted my stories to be picture books rather than magazine stories (after all, books were saved & magazines were thrown away). I've had several pieces published in children's magazines since then, and I should have tried magazines sooner. Magazines are a great way to get credits as a writer, and publishers will often look at the work of someone who's had stories published in magazines. I've heard of cases where authors have gotten calls from book publishers to have a story they wrote for a magazine turned into a picture book or to be included in an anthology or poetry collection.

#4-Learn to be the best writer you can possibly be—read books on writing, join writing organizations, go to workshops and classes on writing. If grammar is a challenge for you, take an English course. Make sure everything you send out into the world says "professional" in every way. It's not okay to have a spelling error in your cover letter or to omit a word in a story. Every word counts—if you don't make certain everything is the best it can be, then why should an editor count on you

to work for them (and that continues as the process goes along—I've found errors in galley copies of books and on flap copy with the author information—double, triple check every single thing—after all, your name's on it).

What RESOURCES/CONTACTS would I recommend?

My top two are: #1 Join Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators (SCBWI)—based in CA. It's the only national organization devoted to people who create children's materials. They have a bi-monthly newsletter with lots of helpful information like where to send your work, conference listings, advice columns, etc. Some publishers WILL look at submissions from SCBWI members if they are not published, since membership indicates a professional attitude and commitment. SCBWI has awards for published materials and grants for works-in-progress. Membership costs \$70 per year. Contact SCBWI at: 8271 Beverly Boulevard/Los Angeles, CA 90048; phone: 323-782-1010; e-mail: membership@scbwi.org; website: www.scbwi.org Also SCBWI has regional organizations which have their own newsletters and conferences—so check out the regional SCBWI group closest to you.

#2 Get a copy of the most recent *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market*, published by Writer's Digest books. There is a new issue each year; it's found in most bookstores in the writing/reference section or check out www.writersdigest.com You'll want your own copy of *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market* so you can highlight in it and use it to your maximum advantage.

Other Resources (in no special order):

*Debbie Ridpath Ohi's blog post on getting an agent: <http://debbieohi.com/debbie-faq/getting-into-the-business/how-did-you-get-your-agent-any-advice-on-how-i-can-get-an-ag.html>

*Read this great advice letter from an editor at Chronicle Books:

<http://www.chroniclebooks.com/blog/2014/12/17/so-youve-written-a-childrens-book-now-what/>

*Check out this great article by picture book author Julie Falatko with her top ten rules for debut authors: <http://12x12challenge.com/2016/03/01/12-x-12-featured-author-march-2016-julie-falatko/>

*Read these articles for writers from the Institute for Children's Literature:

<https://www.instituteforwriters.com/rx-for-writers/>

**Children's Book Insider* www.write4kids.com (including this helpful article to figure out how best to tell your story—Is it a board book, older or younger picture book, early reader, middle grade, etc? <http://writeforkids.org/2015/12/understanding-childrens-book-categories/>)

*publishers online catalogs—It's helpful to see what publishers are currently

publishing. Less publishers send actual physical catalogs now—their information is online—so start by searching publishers by name online to see their books.

*Maine Writer's & Publishers Alliance (for Maine authors)—the only Maine organization devoted to Maine authors, publishers, etc.—newsletter, offers workshops, sponsors contests; www.mainewriters.org

**Publishers Weekly* comes out each week, but they publish a special children's book issue twice a year (mid-Feb. & mid-July) which can be purchased at bookstores or call to mail order these issues at 800-278-2991 or look online at www.publishersweekly.com

*Also subscribe to *Publishers Weekly* free e-mail newsletter: Children's Bookshelf, which comes out twice weekly with all the news from kids book publishing: <http://publishersweekly.com/pw/email-subscriptions/index.html>

*Check out review magazines for children's books—reviews are fun to read, plus they have good articles on what's happening in children's books—Horn Book, School Library Journal, Kirkus, Five Owls, etc.

*On REJECTION: <http://www.wordybirdstudio.com/blog/2015/8/20/rejection>

Do you need to COPYRIGHT your story?

I have NEVER gotten a copyright on what I've written—the publisher does it in my name once they publish it (exceptions—I did copyright a teachers book I wrote and self-published & sold myself—I have done work-for-hire writing in which I write something for a company & they pay me a flat fee and they publish it & THEY have the copyright, not me). When you write something, you already have the copyright for it the moment it's created—but the copyright is NOT registered. See this list of questions about copyrights <http://www.copyright.gov/help/faq/faq-general.html#register> and I'm sure you can search and find more info online. I would never bother to register the copyright for my stories unless I was going to SELF-PUBLISH them—I'll let the publisher do that when they publish that, but you have to decide what's right for you.

Some more advice . . .

[Eight basics on kids book publishing](#)

[Word counts from picture books to YA](#)

[Insight from literary agents](#)

[Royalties, advances, money stuff](#)

[After the deal—when all your dreams do *not* come true](#)

PHEW! That's all I can think of for now. Hope some of this is helpful. Mostly, just keep on writing—you CAN do it!!! I'm sorry to say that I cannot offer to review

manuscripts by other writers; I get requests to do so frequently, and I don't have the time or I'd never get to do any of my own writing & that's what my passion is—to create new stories that one day might be shared with children. Hope it's your passion too, because children deserve great stories from many different voices.

Happy Writing & Good Luck!
Lynn Plourde