

SELF-EDITING FOR PICTURE BOOKS

5 Steps to a Stronger Story



by
Hajera Khaja

“Books for children are as complex as their adult counterparts, and they should therefore be accorded the same respect.” — MARK HADDON

Hello! I’m Hajera Khaja, editor at Ruqaya’s Bookshelf.

I’m a fiction writer, freelance editor, and writing coach.

At Ruqaya’s Bookshelf, we offer a manuscript critique service for writers.



I’ve had the pleasure of reading many works-in-progress and offering advice to writers on how to strengthen their manuscripts.

Over time, I realized that the same issues kept coming up again and again in many stories, which led me to create this ebook.

Here, I’m going to point out to you the five most common issues that could be holding your story back from becoming the best version of itself.

This is not to say that if you fix all five of these issues, your story will be perfect. But chances are, if you’ve got these five areas covered, you’ve got a pretty strong start already.

“The hard work goes into the idea, fiddling with it and rejecting it and loving it and hating it ... I probably do fifteen drafts for a book.”

— ERIC CARLE

1- THE BIG PICTURE

What theme or subject does your story examine? This question should guide you in your writing of your story. For a picture book to be memorable, it must be about more than just a single incident or a series of events in the life of a character.

You should be able to answer the question, *Why does your story matter?*

What’s really at stake if Amina has lost her pet cat, or if Malik’s best friend no longer plays with him, or if Asiya can’t have her favourite bike? These situations are common and relatable, but what’s special about *your* story? What unique take does your story offer that other stories don’t?

In order to dig deeper and figure out what’s at stake, ask yourself what is actually happening underneath the events of the story. If Asiya doesn’t get her favourite bike, so what? What does the bike represent? Does it represent social standing, or perhaps self-worth?

Continue asking, *So what?* until you reach an answer that feels compelling and satisfying, like you’ve solved the puzzle of your story.

“Inexperienced writers may come at the story from an adult perspective. Good writers connect to the child character’s emotion. They connect to the child’s world.”

— JIM AVERBECK

2- CHARACTER

When it comes to child characters, ask yourself if you are writing a character as they really are – as you may know or have observed children to speak and act – or if you are writing a child who speaks and behaves in a way that adults would want them to.

Characters are the heart of any story so it’s important to get them right.

Some clues that your characters are too adult-like are that they behave perfectly and respond to difficult situations in a very mature manner. Or when they speak, they sound as if they are wise beyond their years.

Another issue that often comes up with characters is that when a story has two child characters, there’s no discernible difference between them. To the reader, the characters are interchangeable, and often nothing is lost in the story by removing one of the characters entirely.

If your story has more than one child character, be mindful that the differences between them should be obvious and apparent, and the reader should be able to easily distinguish between the two.

And make sure that each character has a significant role to play in the story. Your story should fall apart if either one of the characters is removed.

“If a wise, well-meaning adult steps in to show the way, get rid of that adult.”

— ANN WHITFORD PAUL

3- ROLE OF ADULTS

If you have a parent or any adult in your picture book, remember that they are not the central character.

Be mindful that you are only telling the story from the perspective of the child (regardless of whether you’re writing in the first or third person), and not to center the emotions of the parent in the story.

The other major mistake many writers make is to have an adult in the story as a guide *and* problem solver.

There’s nothing wrong with a parent or another adult to be present in the story and help the child with their problems in some way. But do not have the adult swoop in at the end to also solve the problem for your character.

Allow the child in your story to take control. Give them agency and write the story in such a way that even if an adult guides them, in the end, the child is empowered enough to act on his or her own.

“Never explain what you do. It speaks for itself. You only muddle it by talking about it.” — SHEL SILVERSTEIN

4- SHOW, DON'T TELL

'Telling' refers to the writer providing information about the characters and summarizing events in the story. 'Showing' refers to writing a scene as it unfolds, and using sensory details to describe the scene and the characters.

While some instances of 'telling' may be necessary, much of your story should be written in scene. But be mindful to avoid wordy descriptions that can easily be captured in the illustrations.

Many writers fall into the trap of 'telling' especially when it comes to describing emotions. A simple way to avoid this is to choose your details carefully. If Zaid notices his friend's new light-up shoes and then looks down at his own shoes and notices a rip in the front, the reader can intuit from this detail that perhaps Zaid's parents are not well-off and that Zaid wishes he had new light-up shoes as well. Instead of saying "Zaid felt sad" you can show Zaid walking away from his friends and finding a spot to sit by himself.

It can be tempting to provide all the answers to your reader, to tell them exactly how a character is feeling and explain why.

Children are smart. Trust that they will understand what is happening in your story and don't talk down to them by explaining everything. It's a much more powerful way to create an emotional connection between your reader and your character.

"The first line of a poem is a hawk which won't let go of its prey."

— GABRIEL PREIL

5- BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

If your story is about a girl who gets lost in a park, you don't need to start your story with the girl waking up and her parents asking her if she wants to go to the park and then showing them getting ready and driving there. You also don't need to offer any explanation about how frequently they go the park and the fact that it's her favourite park because it has the fastest slides.

All of that is just a warm up.

Start your story with the family already at the park. Perhaps even start your story at the point where your character realizes that she is lost.

You don't need to provide the backstory before you launch into your actual story.

End your story with a proper resolution to the problem or conflict that your story centers around.

Don't have the problem simply disappear with a happy coincidence – the girl's aunt happens to be at the park that day and drives her home, for example. Or, the girl runs into her friends who had just seen her parents looking for her and they lead her back to her family.

Create endings that are unexpected but also satisfying.

“Completing a draft of your story isn’t the end of the writing process; it’s the beginning.” — ANN WHITFORD PAUL

Thank you for downloading this ebook!

I hope looking at these five areas in your story and applying the advice here will help you revise your current draft to create an even stronger story.

Remember that stories take time to write. You may have to revisit these same issues in your drafts, over and over, until everything comes together in a complete and satisfying way.

I would love to hear from you! Email me at editor@ruqayasbookshelf.com and let me know how this guide benefitted you in your writing.

