

# 10 Must-Haves for a Solid Illustrated Storybook

by Chazda Albright -

<http://greatstorybook.com/10-must-haves-for-a-solid-illustrated-storybook/>

This entry is part 2 of 6 in the series [How to Start](#)

[How to Start](#)

- [1, 2, 3... KICK! Getting Started on Your First Illustrated Storybook](#)
- 10 Must-Haves for a Solid Illustrated Storybook
- [I Want to Write: where to start](#)
- [To Storybook Mock-up or Not to Mock-up?](#)
- [How I Make Time for Writing](#)
- [5 Essential Writing Elements plus 3 levers](#)

**Illustrated storybooks are all about simplicity, but the process of creating one is quite a challenge. Whether you're currently crafting your first storybook or your fourteenth, you know this to be true. Each story comes with challenges.**

The trick is to make the story flow so well and the characters come so alive, that it seems simple - as if the words and pictures were inevitable; as if they were just waiting to be put together in *that* way to tell *that* story.

**Every illustrated storybook should have certain *things* in it. This is my list of what those Must-Haves are.**

Remember: without structure in a storybook, there is no actual story in the book. It falls apart or lets us down in some way, lacking the kind of Good Stuff we find in our favorite stories - the ones that get read the most, the ones that are so loved that the pages fall right out of the binding.

Here's a list of **10 things every illustrated storybook should have** no matter what.

## **1. The book is between 22-35 pages.**

Many people don't realize this, but an illustrated story should not ever be 40 pages long unless it is a compilation of stories in one volume or a novel-like book for young readers, like a [chapter book](#). Even comic books are only 22 pages of actual content, not more.

There are [industry standards](#) to keep in mind, but more importantly, you want to create content that will really engage your readership. If a story needs more pages than the norm to be told, then it's time to think about serious editing. You want to be [rich without meandering](#), compelling without becoming excessive.

### **Most illustrated storybooks are 32 pages.**

There is no lack of poorly structured illustrated books on the market. Most of these are books that have very well established characters from movies or T.V. shows, and sell anyway because kids and adults recognize those characters. Publishers and the Industry push these throwaways on the market to get quick and easy sales. *Do not use these books to learn how to format a storybook. You will get led astray.*

So what should you do? Read to kids as often as you can and study the respected storybooks. Don't just get them and read them, really work them over. Knowing what's happening in the book market and why is really important. If you want to be in the market, know the market.

[My List of Top 2016 Storybooks](#) is a good place to start. This is a list of brand new stories from artists and writers who have solid reputations for banging-out high quality books.

## **2. The artwork is designed for the book specifically.**

It surprises me how often I see storybooks that have poorly designed covers, sometimes even using unoriginal work. They may sell anyway, but not very well. If you want your story to have longevity and not end up out of print within a year (or slammed in Customer Comments and Reviews), present the story professionally.

Find out [How to Get Great Book Reviews here](#). Five basic ways, with lots of helpful links and resources.

All of the artwork (and perhaps the cover art most of all) should convey the same kind of thought that went into the writing of the project. The images should be a serious aspect of the story and not simply the throw-in artsy stuff that goes above or below the words.

**Side Note:** This may seem obvious to some but it still needs stating: do not write endless descriptions of scenery for the reader. If you're [subcontracting an artist](#), do that. Give them lots of description and complete [block-by-block explanations](#) of what you expect to see from them.

For access to [Manuscript Formatting and other Writer's Essentials](#), take my [FREE Mini-Course](#). These three video sessions (with cheat-sheets and worksheets to download, plus other helpful links) answer the most common questions writers ask me.

## **3. We know the protagonist by page 2.**

Your time and space in an illustrated story is brief. If your main character isn't [clearly identified](#) by page two, there is a big problem. Get to the meat... in this kind of story every page – [or better, every moment](#) - needs to be intentional.

Beginning a story is one of the most daunting things to do as a writer, because you set-up absolutely everything within a very short space. [Find out how to do that properly here: How to Begin a Story to HOOK Readers, Editors and Agents.](#)

### **4. The purpose of the story is clearly established by page 3.**

If the point of the story isn't established by the third page, then the book lacks focus. It might even lack a sense of progression, which means it isn't really a story at all. Make sure your story is clearly outlined and plotted like any other kind of story... meaning it should have a clear beginning, middle and end and it should definitely have a point, some reason of value.

This doesn't necessarily mean a moral. Not every great storybook needs a moral lesson, though those are nice. The Purpose is just the reason for reading the story, and that might be very simple. If it is simply to laugh out loud and have fun, then we should know that about the book almost immediately.

What you want to make clear too is your agenda if you have one. I once picked up a storybook thinking it was about Family Love and on page 12 realized it was about dealing with the death of a loved one. There was nothing about this on the back cover copy, nothing that hinted to it on the cover, in the title, or in any of the pages before.

I was very glad that I found this at the library and that I sat down to read it *before bringing it home*. The book was depressing, but what's really unfortunate is that I know it bombed on the market because those who might benefit from a storybook about grieving are very unlikely to find it.

Do not keep the point or agenda of your book a mystery. Make it very clear so that the right people will find it. This aspect all ties into the design of your book, [especially the cover design](#).

### **5. There must be plot to be a story.**

Every story should have action, things that the protagonist does and that have some kind of influence on their world. Make sure that it is not a series of events that happen to your protagonist, but a series of events that the protagonist *causes*, either intentionally or unintentionally.

This is how you create plot, but it's also how you establish a strong character, one who will come alive in the reader's mind.

A mishap may well be something that happens or fails to happen for the protagonist, but that is not the same thing as plot. *Plot is what your character chooses to do next as a result of a mishap, not the mishap.*

Act II (the middle part of your story) is the most difficult part of the story to write. Yet, it's fully 50% of the actual story. For details on [How to Write Rising Action, go here](#).

#### **What kind of book is not a story?**

*You can write a book without writing a story.* Alphabet Books are most often not stories, but a list of

words that begin with each letter. It has a purpose, but it isn't a storybook. The same is true for most Number Books or books about telling time. This is called a Concept Book. For more about [Genres for Kids Books](#), go [here](#).

### **6. The words are written to engage pre-readers and parents.**

Especially for pre-readers, this is extremely important because it means most often an adult will be doing the reading. This can be a very difficult balance, but look to [the greats for guidance](#). It is possible to keep the words simple – or even SUPER SIMPLE while at the same time not causing an adult to become so bored or irritated that they would prefer a visit to the dentist over reading to their kids.

An example of SUPER SIMPLE is the classic book: [Mouse Paint](#) by Ellen Stoll Walsh.

Or more recently, her 2010 book, [Balancing Act](#). There is nothing simpler or so stripped-down as a book by Ellen Stoll Walsh, but she manages to keep her work of such quality that you can just enjoy the simplicity, clean shapes and colors, and to-the-core text.

Keep words simple but not stupid. Do not dumb down your content. Make it whimsical, perhaps rhyming, or rhythmic. Do not make it saccharine sweet or something that lowers the IQ. Do not write tele-wubby or spongy bore material. Help parents not want to hurt you.

### **7. The language is believable and fluid within that book realm.**

Different kinds of books and characters may well have a [certain kind of dialogue](#). **DinoFour** books, an extensive series, is an excellent example of very believable dialogue for four year olds. The characters are dinosaurs in Kindergarten. It works.

Strength of dialogue is a major aspect of the world, the place where your characters dwell. If the story is in 1930 England, the language can indeed reflect that without losing your audience, which was most likely born around 2002 or later.

Just keep it simple and if need be introduce new words as an aspect of the story. See [Fancy Nancy](#). [These books](#) teach kids words like *delectable* and the etymology of *R.S.V.P.*

If the characters live on another planet or the future or some superhuman existence and some name places or common terms in that realm are of a language or manner you invented, it's all shiny. See [Joss Whedon](#). While his readership is more mature, a graphic novel is a type of illustrated story, and Whedon's use of language is very smart.

### **8. The images are aesthetic yet still support the story.**

## 10 Must-Haves for a Solid Illustrated Storybook

by Chazda Albright - GreatStorybook.com - <http://greatstorybook.com>

---

This is so important, so key. The images should be original. They should be interesting to look at, regardless of style and that style should reflect the emotional tone of the words.

The pictures, *every one*, absolutely must have a reason to be there, and that reason is to support the story. If the words say one thing and the picture shows something else *entirely*, and in a disjointed way, there was a slip-up somewhere in the process of creating the book.

This isn't so important to an adult reader, but it is vitally important to a child. It confuses them, and they will interrupt the storytelling to ask about why the picture doesn't match the words. And they will ask about it every time you read the story. Not once, but every single time.

### 9. The book has a payoff.

The payoff should be written to really pop. This moment of the book should be one that a child reenacts or retells once the book has been put away.

What does that mean? A payoff is that moment that makes a reader either gasp, open their eyes wider, or laugh out loud. It is the climax of an illustrated storybook.

It can be visually different from all the other pages – not stylistically, but in terms of formatting, layout, perhaps thickness of line.

Great examples of this are two board books written by [Jabari Asim](#) and illustrated by [LeUyen Pham](#). At the climactic moment in both of these books, the two-page spread is turned upright so that the book needs to be turned 90°. This is fun, interactive, and a very simple way to clearly show that THIS is the climax. (See **Whose Knees Are These?** and **Whose Toes Are Those?** - both solidly done.)

### 10. The book has a clear and obvious ending.

The ending of a storybook most often has the words The End written at the bottom. I like that a lot. It's clear and obvious and signals that it's time to close the book and maybe get tucked into bed. But a really good ending should have more than that.

The ending needs to **verbally and visually give closure**. You need to show that all the characters are O.K. and happy, and if appropriate show the protagonist or the sidekick doing the activity they needed to learn.

Consider a potty training book. If our protagonist needs to learn potty training and does not want to do so, then the potty itself is the antagonist. After the climactic moment when our protagonist successfully uses the pot and proudly shows Mommy, the ending should show someone happily using the pot... maybe the sidekick, which may well be the protagonist's teddy bear.

That is an ending: the wrap-up, the denouement, or resolution, and because we communicate this mostly with visuals, you can do it within one page. But it does need its own page.

For more about [the importance and timing of Page Turns, go here](#). It's all about how to mock-up your storybook so that you can, in the best and most effective way, make sure your story timing is spot-on. It keeps your readers engaged!

### More Questions? Get Answers!

If you write or want to write for young readers (Storybooks, [Chapter Books](#), Middle Grade Novels, YA Novels), jump into the [“Ask Chazda” Mini-Course](#).

The [“Ask Chazda” Mini-Course](#) is brand new (just launched this week) and completely FREE. No obligation for anything - except to learn. This intense writing course tackles the most burning questions writers have been asking me over the years.

I welcome you to watch the videos, take notes, download the worksheets and other materials - and just GO with it. If you stumble on something in the mini-course and need help/clarification on anything, just email me.

**Keep creating, no matter what.**

//

//

**This entry is part of the series**

[How to Start](#)

**Be sure to check out the other posts:**

[<< 1, 2, 3... KICK! Getting Started on Your First Illustrated Storybook I Want to Write: where to start >>](#)

---