

How to Write a Chapter Book

by Chazda Albright -

<http://greatstorybook.com/how-to-write-a-chapter-book/>

This entry is part 4 of 5 in the series [Format Essentials](#)

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I first wrote this article in 2015, and just yesterday (April 22, 2017) got an email with a slew of questions in it. I realized pretty quickly that I needed to expand and update this one. So here we are.

You might be wondering what exactly a chapter book is. It's a fair question, because in today's market, that term is expanding.

Perhaps the one defining aspect that everyone agrees is that it's a story divided into chapters and that the story is less than 40,000 words. As a writer, this type of information is nearly useless. It's even less helpful for a reader.

Artwork by Jossi B.

But there is a simple way to break this down: audience.

For the adult audience.

If the intended readers are adults, then the chapter book is understood to be a lengthy short story divided into reasonable segments. This definition of a chapter book is fairly new and it might well phase-out again before it gains any traction.

In Adult Education

You often find chapter book formats being used for teaching English as a second language. These are something I like to use for my adult students, because they get an enjoyable story to read and the feeling of accomplishment once they've completed the novel.

There's just something nice about being able to read a novel, even if it's a shorter one. In most cases, chapter books for adults have as many illustrations as those for kids (3-4 per chapter). However, you do sometimes see chapter books that have only one illustration per chapter.

Early Readers

For the quite young audience (ages 6-8).

If the intended readers are between the ages of 6-8, then these are a newer format of chapter book that really (so far as I'm concerned) should be given a different term. These are the "I Can Read" type of booklets that enable an early reader to begin reading a novel-like book all on their own.

The total word count is about 1,500. That's it.

The use of words is very simple, there are illustrations on every page and the print is very large, usually a font-size of 16-18. These booklets are great for in-class reading, but a child in this age span will generally grab a hardback illustrated storybook before wanting one of these.

Anthropomorphic or not?

I've seen that some writing sources suggest "no anthropomorphic characters" for chapter books, but when you look at the market and the chapter books that are highly recommended, a GOOD NUMBER of them do in fact have talking animals. So I'd say that as long as your story is upbeat, you can do whatever you want.

I found a terrific list of [Best Chapter Books 2016](#) on [All the Wonders](#). If you haven't heard of this website yet, take a moment to go check it out. I think it's great.

Chapter Books

For the traditional chapter book audience (ages 8-11).

This is actually what most would consider the usual demographic for a chapter book (and what traditional publishers typically mean with it). Still, I'm including the other definitions as well because there is a lot of overlap in how people really talk about these books.

Traditional chapter books have a fairly regulated structure, though there are some exceptions and some leeway. Some chapter book authors have chosen to lengthen each chapter book they write in a given series, with the idea that the reader's comprehension ability and attention span will increase with every reading.

What we're seeing right now.

In today's market, most Chapter Books are about 15,000-20,000 words. But again, there's a lot of overlap between Chapter Books and YA Novels. In some cases, you'll find Chapter Books that are a good 40,000 words - which seems to be the limit for some publishers and downright unpublishable for other publishers.

As with anything else you might write, a lot of this gets down to the publisher. You've got to do your homework and find the right fit. What you don't want to do is write a manuscript for the publisher. I've seen writers try to do it that way, and it never really works out - I think mostly because they're too wrapped up in what they think the publisher wants them to write, when instead a writer should really be focused on writing a great story.

Spin your yarn. You can always trim it to fit later.

Great Example, *increasing* length

A well-done example of this is [The Worst Witch](#) by Jill Murphy. If you read this series, you'll easily see where a lot of Harry Potter material hailed. Illustrations and story are by Murphy and she does a great job of pacing in every book. It keeps readers wanting to turn pages. She really understands the right tone that speaks to kids.

Really Bad Example

Some chapter books are really quite terrible. Make sure your grammar is decent. It's at this level of writing that kids are really beginning to learn how to write.

I was shocked to discover that the successful and long-running chapter book series [The Magic Tree House](#) is riddled with sentence fragments. As a young student who had a terrible time avoiding sentence fragments (and who suffered greatly under my teacher's wrath for it), I find it horrible that a publisher would bring something like this to the market! How should kids learn to write well if the books they read do not satisfy standard requirements?

Interestingly, the poor grammar has been translated out of the foreign-language versions. If your child likes this series, have them read a version that isn't in English.

A Fantastic Chapter Book Series!!! Learn from the best.

I think perhaps the best example of a long running chapter book series is [The A to Z Mysteries](#) by [Ron Roy](#), illustrated by [John Steven Gurney](#). These books are really well written and they're crafted truly for their intended readers.

Ron Roy books are *splendid*. If you want to read a perfect example of a chapter book, this is where to look. Straight away, Ron Roy establishes a sense of interesting characters with terrific dialogue that is believable and age appropriate. This is so hard to do on purpose! Yet he does, with great intention. When

you read his stories, you can clearly see the structure there.

Kids love these stories and they really enjoy the characters, even after they have grown too old for the series. Kids grow up and sometimes look back on the stories they enjoyed with a cringe. Not with Ron Roy's books. These are fine chapter books that keep readers hooked.

Should the length stay the same?

Increasing book length and complexity across a series works very well when the books are first published. If there is a half-year or year between each book release, then it stands to reason that the readers won't want the same book complexity by the time the last book is available.

The only problem with this is that for new readers who discover the series after a fifth book release (for example), they will want to read through the entire series as it stands: all five books. For this reason, I would recommend deciding on a format and level of reading complexity from the beginning, and then sticking with that throughout the entire series.

Remember that every time a subsequent book in a series comes on the market, all the previous titles also get a sales boon. The more buzz about a book series, the more new readers will want to jump into the fray. When they do, they'll need to start from the beginning.

When you go to the local library, you'll find that when it comes to chapter book series, they often keep the entire series on hand. It's for this very reason.

If you want to branch out into higher vocabulary, deeper scenes and longer books, make a full jump into the [MG \(Middle Grade\)](#) or YA (Young Adult) novel writing. Rights of passage are important, and I think it's good to have this sense when it comes to reading levels, too.

The Chapter Book Format

If you plan on delving into chapter book writing, then you might want to *create your draft in the actual format* that it needs to be. This will help you gauge your story pacing.

- Chapter Books usually have 10 chapters, though it's ok to have more.
- Each chapter is about 8 pages.
- A chapter book is less than 100 pages (usually).
- Each chapter has between 1-4 illustrations, all black and white, but no full-page panels.
- The font style should be simple to read; the norm is Times New Roman.
- The font size is 14-16, typically.
- The language style is conversational and simple.
- The protagonist is always a kid (usually human, but not necessarily), somewhere within the age range of the readers (6-11 - usually 8).
- Anyone with a level B-1 English ability can get through the book without difficulty.

Setting up the story.

The plot of a chapter book should not be too complex. Within ten chapters (each ending at a cliff hanger moment), the story must be wrapped up nicely by the conclusion. There should be a clear and obvious sense that there will be more stories to come.

You should only delve into chapter books if you intend to write a series. A stand-alone chapter book won't go anywhere – not in today's market.

What is NOT a Chapter Book?

To be clear: there are some novels that have been dubbed chapter books because the intended readers are under 13. An illustrated novel is not the same thing as a chapter book.

What is an illustrated novel? This is any kind of novel written for any demographic (any age group at all) that has at least one black-and-white drawing in every chapter. Some Internet Book Lists use the term chapter books when they really mean an illustrated novel or a novel for kids.

For details on [all the types of books with pictures, go HERE](#).

What we all want

We want to read great stories, and we want to write *really* great stories. If you want to truly hone your storytelling ability, then crafting a story that must engage kids is a great challenge to undertake.

When you are limited to such tight restrictions, you must bring your writing to a peak. It must be sharp, every page – because there is no room for extra wordage.

What about you? What's your favorite chapter book series – are you working on one? Write below, let me know – or just send me an email. I'm here to answer any questions you might have, so just zip them over!

Keep creating, no matter what.

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