

Road Testing a Story Mock-Up

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<http://greatstorybook.com/road-testing-story-mock/>

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[Community](#)

- [My List of Top Storybooks to Read in 2016](#)
- [Story and Real Life Merge](#)
- Road Testing a Story Mock-Up
- [Bringing People Together with Story](#)
- [Blogging for Writers](#)
- [New Year Writer: resolutions that work](#)
- [How to Find Great Storybooks](#)
- [International Appeal: how to write for it](#)

Road testing a story mock-up isn't just a good idea, it's vital.

This is what happened when I road tested one of my unpublished manuscripts to a bunch of munchkins at the local library.

The results were quite unexpected.

Artwork by Georgia Edwoods.

Every month, I read an illustrated storybook to kids at the local library, followed by a craft project. This year, the [library's delivery of 2016 books](#) was unexpectedly delayed.

When I asked the librarian what I should read, she suggested I bring [one of the stories I've written](#). So I decided to grab the opportunity and test-read one of my unpublished manuscripts on an unsuspecting audience of mostly 5 year-olds.

This is exactly like having a table read of a new screenplay.

Road Testing a Story Mock-Up at the Library

Typically, the kids who come to my [Happy Palmtree](#) events are older, around 6-11 years old. So the month of March proved to be a little different.

I suspect this was for a lot of reasons, not the least of which was the Easter Vacation time for school kids had just started. In fact, this particular Happy Palmtree was the day (Holy Thursday) before Good Friday, so many kids were already away.

I decided to read a seasonal story, so I chose [The Easter Crocodile](#), using rough black and white sketches created by the very talented Australian illustrator [Georgie Edwoods](#), a gal I've had the pleasure to collaborate with for this project.

This story was originally a musical production performed by kids, so my original script was quite theatrical and involved a lot of songs. Adapting that story to an illustrated storybook was no easy task, but I felt like I had a pretty solid book.

Reading this story to a pack of kids (four of them happened to be from Australia, just like the artist) gave me a very different perspective on the story's flow, it's strengths and weaknesses.

Here's where the kids helped me spot problems & pros with my manuscript:

- They pointedly and easily showed me what word choices were too adult or too just-not-quite-right.
- They demonstrated where there was a lull in the story – by ceasing to pay attention!
- They also demonstrated some unexpected strengths to the story. (More on that below.)
- They revealed to me what was most interesting about the story and characters.

When you read a story to kids, it has a totally different feel than when you read it aloud to yourself, or to your own kids. It just does. Maybe it's because chubby-cheeked little people have the tendency to ask questions, to get up and point to the book, to wonder about things out loud and in the middle of your sentence.

Here's an example.

The word "native" is in the book and one 4 year-old girl didn't know what that was. "Excuse me," she said in her adorable Australian accent with a very strong lisp, "what is a 'native?'" I fell in love with this child immediately.

"If a person is born in a certain place, then they are a native of that place," I said. This resulted in a lengthy discussion. All of the children weren't sure where they might be a native. Almost all of them, my own daughter included, are bi-cultural.

The line from the book was this, "These experienced travelers followed one simple rule: Do NOT Scare The Natives!" The travelers are a crocodile and a porcupine.

The conversation was a beautiful thing, and it made me realize two things:

- Perhaps I should reconsider the use of this word in the story. [Vocabulary is a key point](#) in writing illustrated storybooks.
- Perhaps I should reconsider this word, just in general! I'm not really sure how validly it can be used in our modern, western world.

What the Mock-up Physically Was

The illustrations I was able to use in this mock-up were rough sketches, no color. So to make the book more interesting to the kids, I told them it was a fancy coloring book.

My own copy was bound in a simple hardback binding. To get that done, I just went to my local printer, which is a family business I've come to rely on for all my urgent (read: procrastinated to the last possible minute) printing projects. I had that printed and bound the day of the book reading.

The hardback version cost me less than \$10. I also had my printer ([The Copy Hof](#) - only use if you're in Germany) make ten additional copies of the coloring book, with those pages simply stapled together. That way, up to 10 kids would be able to take a free copy of the mock-up home with them.

The last page of the book invites parents to visit my personal website at www.Chazda.com for updates and freebies.

The Unexpected Strength

In one section of the story, I had absolutely *no visuals at all* - four pages of just text. So I decided to set it up like an Activity Book. I added empty boxes where illustrations should be, with instructions to draw what should be there.

When I pointed to these pages in particular, the kids got really excited. "Wow, cool!" There were literally gasps of excitement.

Inviting the kids to finish illustrating the book turned out to be very well received. It was a happy accident, and completely unexpected.

The greatest weakness of the story, namely, not having any illustrations for four full pages, turned out to be an unexpected strength.

It reminded me yet again how inventive kids are, and how readily they will jump into doing creative tasks. I haven't quite decided yet, but I may in the end keep these particular pages unfinished.

It actually works well with the story, because it's an Experiment Phase of the story, where the two main characters conduct an experiment together. Why? They're trying to find out why the Easter Bunny hides the beautiful Easter Eggs instead of putting them on display. To find out, they conduct an experiment. It's at this particular point where the book has no illustrations.

So the readers (at this point, for the mock-up at least) get to do the experiment *with* the main characters,

and fill-out the paperwork for the characters.

The Next Step

So now I've test driven the story, what next? I'm going to go over the whole thing again, page-by-page, illustration-to-illustration, and word after word. There's much refining to be done - and much reconsidering, too.

What about you? Have you ever used a mock-up in this way - to test-drive your story to a group of kids (or maybe adults)? Write below; let me know. Or, as ever, write me an email. If you have questions about how to make a mock-up of your storybook, just send those over.

Keep creating, no matter what.

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