

Watch Your Language!

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<http://greatstorybook.com/watch-your-language/>

This entry is part 3 of 4 in the series [Writing Terms](#)

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As a writer, it's important to remember the basics: spelling, grammar, character development, plot richness, etc. But one really important aspect of writing is for some particularly troublesome. When writing for younger readers and pre-readers, that troubling thing is language.

What I mean by this is not whether you are using English or any other language, and I also don't mean avoiding four-letter words (a.k.a. swear words).

Language in this case means how we build-up our sentences to capture a really young audience while still being able to tell an actual story. This isn't so easy, and if you're aiming to write a storybook because you think it will be easier than a novel, think again. Starting with a limited number of words, this is the same reason Flash Fiction competitions and the like have been invented: *it forces writers to convey a story within a harshly limited wordcount.*

Here's a simple break-down of what to keep in mind when crafting your story's *language*:

1. **Fewer words.** [Yes, really.](#) It's a lot easier to get a point across if you have an unlimited number of words to do it. In a book for kids, the more words you have, the sooner you will lose your audience to the fly sitting on the wall. Your words need to count - to be essential, so that they have greater impact. To captivate kids, say what you want to say directly and economically.

2. **Fewer word options.** Not only must you keep your word count low, you need to be mindful of the fact that a child of 3 does not have the same vocabulary as a kid of 12. When you write a story, first determine

the proper age group and then write for that age. This doesn't mean you need to dumb-down anything. Be focused.

If the reader is 3, you don't use the word "necessary" when you can use "need."

3. Compelling yet simple. This is a hard line to follow, but absolutely important if you want the kids to finish the story rather than set it aside to do something else. I myself am a picky reader. If I'm not hooked immediately (within the first couple of chapters), it's unlikely I'll finish that novel. Kids are exactly like me, just smaller and more energetic. So write to that. Hook them immediately and keep them captivated – but do so while using their kind of language.

If you're not sure what I mean here, check these articles (bulleted below). I've listed for you some of the best examples of solidly done illustrated storybooks. If you want to know how to write for kids of a specific age group, this is your homework... a good place to start, anyway.

- [Best Books for Baby](#)
- [Best Books for Pre-Readers](#)
- [TOP Books for the Local Library, 2015](#)

4. Don't be preachy. Most adults don't generally like being told what to do, especially when they didn't ask. Kids don't either. If you want kids to hear your message - the moral or ethical idea you want them to learn, then you need to be clever in the way you craft your story.

Starting a storybook narrative straight away with, "learn from my mistakes" type of structure and language will not go anywhere. That's a lecture, not a story.

Ask yourself this: if you were to sit someone down (of any age, really) and tell them the story, would they sit through the whole thing? Would they remain sitting on the edge of their seat just to hear how it ends? If not, then you have your answer: time for a rewrite.

5. We get to ZING! Illustrated storybooks enable us to tell stories both verbally and visually – what's more, we can add sound effects to our books. If we want a POW! –then we simply add that to the right picture. Remember that this is also part of your storytelling vocabulary.

6. Rhyming is good. It isn't necessary, but if you can write rhyming stories then you have a leg-up. Many studies have shown that early-readers who learn rhyming stories and poems develop much stronger language abilities than kids who don't. This affinity to language doesn't fade with age, either. It sustains through a person's entire life.

Rhyming starts with day one of a child's life. Kindergarten programs are heavy in rhymes and rhyme-driven lessons.

Don't think for a moment that rhyming becomes uncool during the teenage years. Wrong. You just have to be more – of everything. Yuckier, funnier, braver, scarier – whatever it is, more. In rhyme, all that is awesome.

7. **Get clever.** We tend to think that kids don't make the decisions about what they read. To a certain extent, that's true. But if a child tells a parent (or anyone) that they really want to read a certain book, I don't think there are many who would refuse to get a copy.

Remember that a book is something you want people to buy. That means it is ultimately a product - as such, you need to do your best to make it a product that people will want to spend money on to get and keep and hopefully share because it's just that good.

Keep these 7 things in mind when writing your next story.

Be demographic-specific and you'll be better able to find the right readership for the type of story you want to tell. Be language conscientious, and you'll be able to capture and keep their attention.

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