Making it Count: word count & structure in storybooks

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http://greatstorybook.com/making-it-count-word-count-structure-in-storybooks/

This entry is part 3 of 11 in the series Devil in the Details

Devil in the Details

There are certain questions that I tend to get asked more often than others. Sometimes those questions are about really tough writing problems and sometimes they are more technical in nature – more about physical requirements of a certain type of book.

The question of word count is something I get asked a lot – specifically, how many words should an illustrated storybook have? When do you know if you've written too much?

If taken as one of those basic questions, then this question can be simply answered, and the general standards can be listed for us as a simple and straightforward reference (HERE). But I've come to find that you can also write quite a bit about word count and still not really feel sure about any of it.

There are general expectations in word count for different novel genres for adults (for example: a romance novel and a sci-fi novel do not have the same word count expectations).

Can we say the same is true of books for children? I wonder if anyone even knows what the rule of thumb should be on that score. A fable and a concept book are vastly different from each other. Do they also have different word counts?

The Minimum Word Count for an Illustrated Storybook

The minimum word count for an illustrated storybook is actually zero words. 0! Is this the norm? Of course not. Do these make for good bedtime reading? No way. The function of [wordless stories](#) is to get the viewer to open their imagination and create a story.

Books like this are meant to be enjoyed during the day, not right before bed. For a language teacher wanting to get students to speak up, wordless storybooks can be a fantastic tool.

It's worth noting too that wordless stories tend to be incredibly artful in nature, filled with the types of images that you might find in a gallery. So their function is quite different from that of most illustrated storybooks - at least on these specific points:

- visual artistry and appeal,
- the time of day it should be used,
- context and purpose of book, and
- how the story is expressed (the viewer speaks the story to others in their own words, and they can even make up additional details in the storytelling).

The Expected *Words* of an Illustrated Storybook

If your illustrated storybook is meant for kids aged 4-6 or 7-8, there is most often a large difference in word count, but not necessarily. Sometimes, storybooks for slightly older kids can have fewer words than ones for toddlers in Kindergarten. Why?

The reason for that is largely because many of these books are written for pre-readers. That means the audience (the kids) are not meant to read the story. As a writer, we're left then with three options:

- we can write to the adult reader who reads aloud, or
- we can write more simply, for the child, or
- we can write simply even though an adult will read it.

Choosing one or the other of these options above will result in a drastically different type of book. [The vocabulary](#) shouldn't be too extraordinary either way, but the words that a 7-year old *can read* and the words a 7-year old *can understand* make up a drastically different list of word-options for the writer.

I find that the third option seems to be more common today than it was twenty years ago, and the types of books I grew up with probably landed in the first category. **[The Wind in the Willows](#)** (1908), [Free to Be You and Me](#) (1972) and [Plant a Kiss](#) (2011) are vastly different stories, but more than that - their style and their language and their word count are also all vastly different.

Is the way we're reading changing - and with that change, our word count? This isn't rhetorical. I am really not sure.

The Expected Word *Count* of an Illustrated Storybook

There is no hard and fast rule in that regard. **Still, the typical 32-page illustrated storybook has 450 *characters* or less (characters, not words) per page.** If you cruise your local library or local bookshop for illustrated storybooks, you'll see that this is true most of the time.

The language used and *the cohesiveness of the story with the story style* is of course much more important. But perhaps an aspect of that story style and structure is more tightly linked with word count than one might generally expect. Still, the only way to really crack what makes a storybook great is to study the greats.

Here's what you can do.

Go to your bookshelf and pull out one of your favorite illustrated storybooks. THEN:

1. Ask yourself: does this inspire you in some way? How - to do what? Why?
2. Count the words on a few pages. What is the average? Does this at any point in the story increase or decrease dramatically? (Example: it does in books like **Where the Wild Things Are**, where it plummets to zero on some spreads and **The Dark**, where it suddenly increases by quite a bit on one page.)
3. What is the purpose of this book? What is its Genre?
4. Does this book fulfill the market and reader expectations? How?
5. What is most important to the protagonist?

The best way to write anything is to read, re-read and then study what you love. Go through this process with a few of your favorites and you might well start to see certain trends.

Keep creating, no matter what.

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