

How I Write Picture Books

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The basic ingredients:

- “ A great idea, best if it makes you want to laugh or cry
- “ A maximum of three characters
- “ A single point of view
- “ A desperate problem
- “ 50 -1,300 words
- “ 14 double page spreads
- “ A beginning, middle, and end

My first draft:

1. I number each double page spread as I write. In every spread I try to:
 - “ Visualize a different picture for each spread. (If the setting stays static all the way through, I have a magazine story rather than a picture book.)
 - “ Keep the conflict strong. I ask myself, “What does the character want that he can’t have, and why can’t he have it?”
 - “ Pose a question for the reader—not a literal question, something to make the reader want to turn the page.
 - “ Keep each spread approximately the same length.
2. In the very first spread I attempt to:
 - “ Introduce setting, conflict, and the main character in the first sentence.
 - “ *Show* what the point of view character wants and why he can’t have it.
 - “ Introduce the other characters.

3. I continue writing spread by spread—in order. In each successive spread, I work hard to intensify the problem, gradually building tension as the book progresses.
4. After I finish spread seven, I skip to the end and write spread fourteen, the last spread. I resolve the story on this spread to guarantee a satisfactory ending for the book.
5. Next, I back up to double spread thirteen and write the climax, the part of the story where all seems lost. (I write in this particular order to ensure I don't drag out the ending. I keep it brief for maximum punch.)
6. I return to the middle and start filling in the gap between spreads seven and thirteen. At this point, I know if I need to add or delete material. If the book will be too short, I add an incident not planned earlier, or I go back and separate one of the middle spreads into two. I adjust things to make sure I can still see a different picture in each spread. I continue intensifying the conflict.
7. I decide whether or not I want an optional single page spread fifteen. If fourteen completes the book satisfactorily, I leave spread fifteen blank. The artist will include a spot illustration on fifteen.
8. The rewrite begins:
 - “ I go over the entire manuscript, smoothing and adjusting it.
 - “ I ask people to read and give me feedback.
 - “ I tighten the writing and cut out adjectives and adverbs.
 - “ This process may take you weeks. It often takes me months.