

WRITER'S TOOLKIT



Genre Guide: Children's Literature

To effectively target your revisions and submissions, you need to know what's what. For example, if you're writing picture books you need to know they traditionally have 32 pages and the illustrations tell half (or more!) of the story. Graphic novels have their own set of guidelines, as do YA, chapter books, and middle grade novels.

Do you know what genre your current manuscripts fall into? Do you know what genre you're interested in writing?

You'll learn this by reading stacks and stacks of books in your chosen genre. Below, you'll find a reading list of the best books in a few standard genres. Reading these books is one of the best ways to get a feel for what your audience likes and expects in that category.



Why is this so important? It's important because you don't want to blow your chance with an editor, agent, or even a critique partner. For example, a manuscript with 62 rhyming paragraphs (or stanzas) about two young blond sisters who run track is not, by any stretch, a picture book. It could, however, be turned into a great young adult novel. Knowing the basics of each genre ensures you hit all the right marks for readers and you submit to a publisher who is a good fit for the work.

There are no hard and fast rules, but there are certain expectations a reader (be it an editor, agent, or reader) will have for each genre. Here's a quick guide to help you figure out which genre or category is the best fit for what you want to write.

PICTURE BOOKS

Word Count: Fiction - 500 words or less, Nonfiction - 500-800 words

Age Range - 2 - 9 years

Pages: 32 pages (occasionally 40 pages)

Writing a picture book is being part of a book partnership which includes the writer and the illustrator. The storytelling in picture books is a joint effort between text and illustrations. When writing, remember to trust your illustrator. Since the illustrations show the story, picture book texts don't need to include many descriptions. With only 500 words to tell your story, every word must make an impact.

Instead of: The little blond girl walked to her grandma's blue house. She was happy to be there.

Try: Suzy skipped to Grandma's house and jumped in her arms.

By choosing more active verbs, we didn't have to tell the audience the girl was happy. They can see it in her actions. The color of the girl's hair and the color of the grandma's house isn't pertinent to the story. So, we'll leave those decisions up to the illustrator. Many times, the illustrator comes up with something the author never could have imagined.

Remember, you don't have to be an illustrator to write picture books. Editors love to pair the right text with the right illustrator. As the author, your job is to write the best manuscript you can.

Even if you're a "writer-only," it's recommended that you insert your text into a book dummy, which can be created from paper you staple or fold together; it's a mock-up of a picture book. Why? So you can see how the text flows. Ask yourself if your jokes land? How do the page turns affect the pacing of your story? Do you have too many words on the page, obliterating room for illustrations? A dummy is a great tool to help you envision your picture book manuscript in its eventual form. Unless you are an author-illustrator, do not submit your picture book dummy when querying an agent or editor. Submit in regular manuscript form and do not paginate your manuscript. The dummy is just a way for *you* to see how the story flows.

Picture books generally have one or two main characters about the same age as the target audience. Generally, picture books don't have adult main characters, but in the ones that do, the adult has a childlike quality kids can relate to. Though you may see a subplot through the illustrations, there is usually a straightforward story and not too many characters.

Picture books look simple, but when you have to create a full story and an engaging main character in less than 500 words, it can take a lot of thought and revision to find the perfect words.

Classic example: *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak

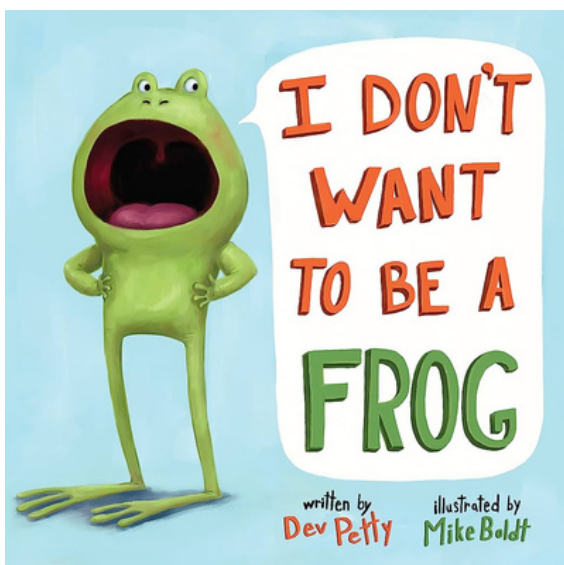
Modern classic: *I Don't Want to Be a Frog* written by Dev Petty and illustrated by Mike Boldt



STORY AND PICTURES BY MAURICE SENDAK



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EASY/EARLY READERS

Word Count: 200-2,000 words

Age Range – 4 -8 years

Pages: 32-64 pages

Early chapter books or early readers are designed for beginning readers. Writers who can convey lively action and fun characters in clear direct sentences are in demand for this genre. These books are often part of a series, meaning your first sale can sometimes turn into many books.

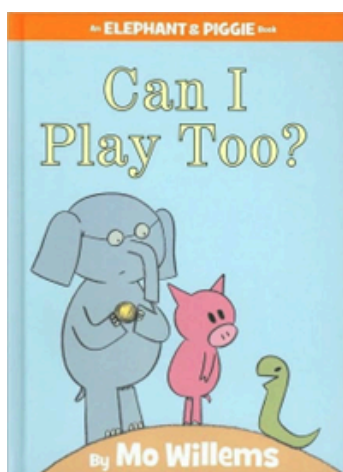
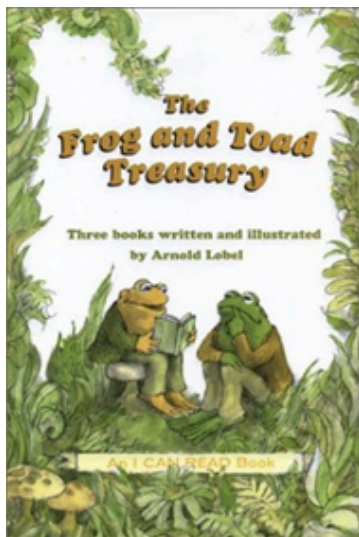
The books in this category have different levels targeted at children who are starting to read independently. Words are repeated often to increase familiarity, and there is usually a lot of dialogue.

While these books are generally illustrated, it is to support the words and give context clues to young readers. Some early reader books are written by author-illustrators, but editors will also pair up an illustrator with an author when they find a manuscript that fits within their catalog.

Length in pages depend on the publisher, but range from 32-64 pages, with 200-2000 words.

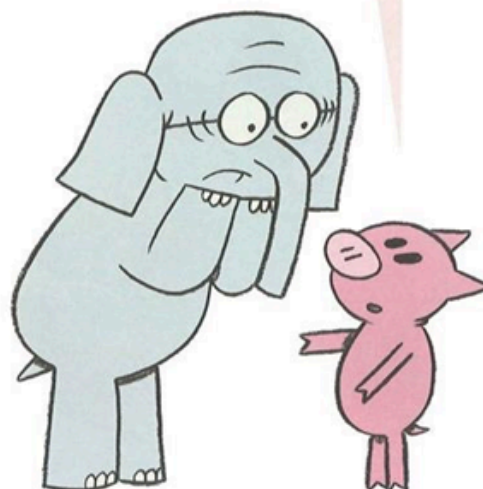
Classic example: *Frog and Toad* by Arnold Lobel
Modern classic: *Elephant and Piggie* by Mo Willems

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All books end.



MIDDLE GRADE

Word Count: 20,000 – 50,000 words

Age Range – 8 – 13 years

Pages: 100-150 pages

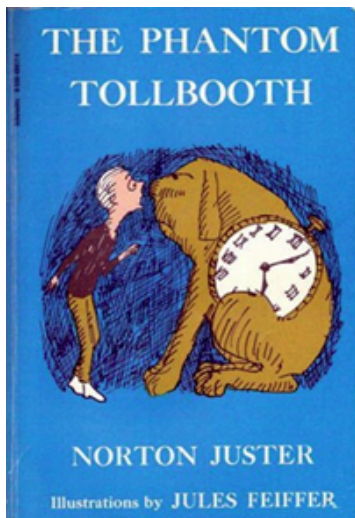
Middle grade is considered a “Golden Age of Reading.” Kids reading this genre are reading a lot whether for school or for fun. These stories are no longer told through the illustrations, although you may find some illustrations, cartoons, or other graphics throughout the book. *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series by Jeff Kinney does this effectively. Since your story doesn’t rely on the pictures, writers can give more descriptions of their characters and surroundings. Keep in mind though, this age group isn’t looking for a two-page description of character’s bedroom. Continue to use strong verbs and nouns instead of relying on adverbs and adjectives to get your point across.

Themes and characters can also expand in this genre. You still may only have one or two main characters, but they can interact with a much larger group of minor characters. Your main characters should be in the 9-14-year-old range. New genres can be introduced to this group including Fantasy, Adventure, and Mystery.

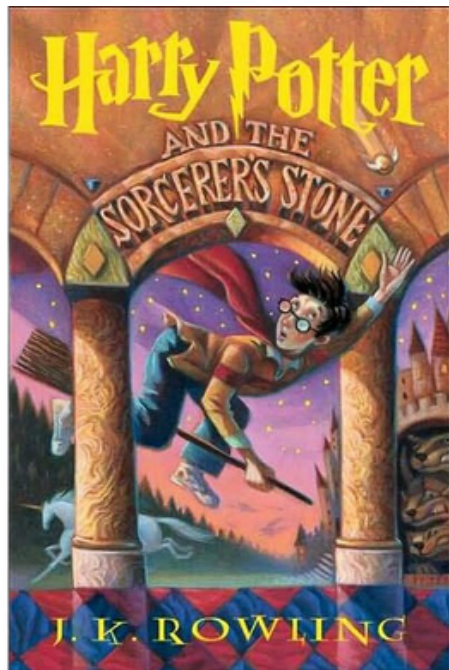
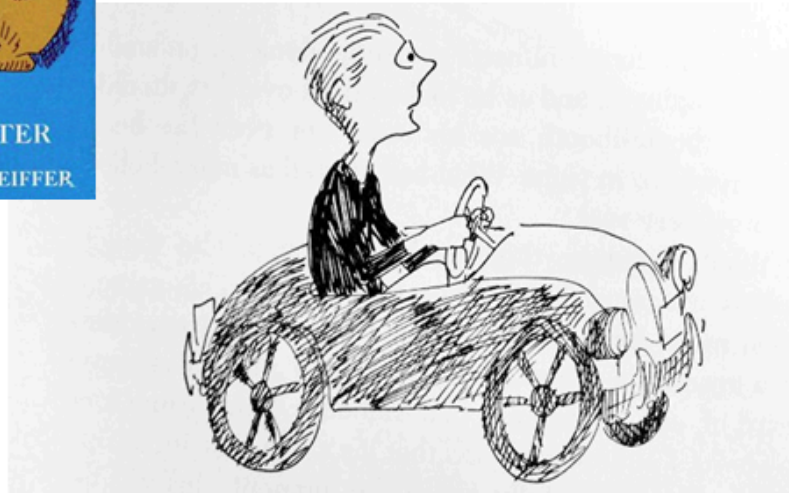
Many series in this genre become hugely popular, since kids between the ages of 8 and 13 are reading these for school (and for pleasure) and become very attached to the characters, and passionate about the story lines. This is a wide range of ages, so your books aimed at the lower end will be shorter, while books aimed at the higher end can be longer. The stories are more intriguing and can delve deeper into the emotional lives of characters.

Classic example: *The Phantom Tollbooth* by Norton Juster

Modern classic: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by JK Rowling and illustrated by Jim Kay



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YOUNG ADULT

Word Count: 55,000 – 80,000 words

Age Range – 12 - 18 years

Pages: 200-350 pages

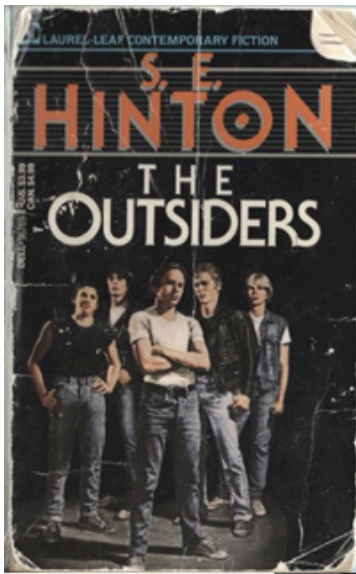
There are a wide range of levels in YA novels, since the readership range in age from 12 and up. (Yes, adults read these too!) They're longer, and often deal with the same incendiary topics the readers are dealing with. Some YA novels can go beyond the 80,000-word count if you're writing fantasy or sci-fi where world-building is essential to your story.

Characters in YA are mid-to older teens. Many YA novels are written in first person to allow the reader to engage more intimately with the character's thoughts and feelings. Themes are wide open for young adult novels as you explore stories in a variety of genres including, but not limited to, romance, sci-fi, fantasy, the hero's journey, horror, or thriller.

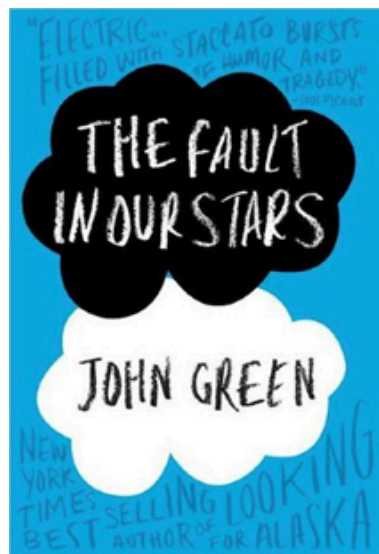
YA novels are some of the most beloved books ever. The longer structure of novels gives you more time to explore themes and bring your characters to life. Some YA novels lend themselves to a series or trilogy (think *Hunger Games*), but many are a single story told in one novel. If you find yourself writing a character in their late teens and starting life on their own, that is considered the New Adult genre.

Classic example: *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton

Modern classic: *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green



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