

## Things to think about before you submit to the Storylines Joy Cowley Award



Hi there – my name is Melinda Szymanik and I am a published picture book author and a previous judge for the Storylines Joy Cowley Award. While reading through the submissions last year I noticed a number of common problems and issues that kept cropping up, so I thought I'd mention a few things you should be thinking about when writing your story and when preparing your submission.

### Layout

The majority of picture books are 32 pages long in total (with the 24 page format also fairly common). Stories often start and end with a single page, but it can be helpful to think of the 32 page book as needing text for 14 -15 double-page spreads (or up to 30 single pages), as allowance must always be made for a title page and an imprint page. There is some variation around this but it will only be by a page or two at most. When you write your story it needs to fit this format. If your story is not going to stretch to 14-15 double pages, then aim for the 10-11 spreads (or up to 22 single pages) of a 24 page book.

The maximum word count for submissions is 1000 words, but if you check out picture books in the shops today the word count tends to be more like 500-600 words. Manuscripts now range most often between 250 and 650 words. I have two picture books being published next year. The word count for one is 428, and the other is 234, but there is no stinting on plot or character, or language. You **don't** need 1000 words to write a successful picture book that captures your reader's imagination and delights them. Wordier manuscripts do still get published but they are the exception these days.

Font should be something simple and readable, like Times New Roman, Arial or Calibri, in 12 point font size.

You **do not** need to arrange your manuscript with each page of text on a separate sheet of paper. Think of the environment. It is preferred that you write your story in paragraphs, showing the separation between 'pages' with a double line space between or 'pp.3-4' etc. To help both yourself and the judge/publisher, you can number each section of text to show which page it relates to (e.g., p.1 title page, p.2 imprint page, text begins p.3, pp.4-5, pp.6-7 etc. Sometimes the imprint page will be page 24 or 32 so that the story can begin with a double-page spread rather than begin and end with a single page). It's a good reminder to you that you have sufficient text and to the publisher/judge that the story works in the picture book format. If you are at all confused about pages and spreads, study a selection of picture books to see how they are laid out.

Remember that the text for each spread should suggest or support a different picture from the previous spread. The illustrations need to progress and change, just like the story does. This might seem obvious but it is easy to overlook this when writing and you only discover later that your text doesn't lend itself to sufficient variation in the artwork.

Best practice is to number your pages and put the title of the story as the header on each page. Should your pages get separated for any reason after you've submitted them, they will find their way back to each other if numbered and labelled with the title.

## Rhyming

Should you write in rhyme? It's such a compelling idea to do this. Rhyming stories are very seductive. They are fun to read and can help with the acquisition of reading skills. **But** rhyme is **not** always the right form for a story. And it is **very** hard to do well. And it is **not** essential for a picture book. For the nine picture book manuscripts I've had accepted for publication, only one has been written with some rhyme in it. Writing in prose has not stopped me getting published. What is most important is the story.

However, if you do choose to write in rhyme, remember the key rules to successful rhyming.

First of course is the rhyme itself, the sound-alike words that usually end each line, or every second line (there are a few permutations). Rhyme can also be found internally (mid-line). The biggest problems when it comes to rhyming are the use of old-fashioned or dated words, made-up words, using words that require an unconventional or incorrect pronunciation to make them rhyme, odd syntax to make the rhyming word fall at the end of the line, or the use of an odd word that doesn't fit with the tone or style of the rest of the story. They often interrupt the flow of reading and confuse readers. If you are relying on one of these types of words, it would be better to find a different rhyming pair.

The second key aspect for a successful rhyming story is rhythm. It has equal importance with rhyme, and its role should not be underestimated. It won't matter if your rhyming is genius if the rhythm is off.

Rhythm is a matter of syllables and stresses. You don't have to be a slave to counting syllables, and having the same number in each line, but you do need to generate a smooth repeating pattern or tempo.

The stressed syllable in each word will also have an impact on the rhythm. The stresses must also fit a pattern, for example Te DA te DA te DA te DA. If a stress naturally falls on the first syllable of a word, but your pattern requires that it falls on the second or third syllable, you CANNOT use that word. We do not say econOMy, we say eCONomy. Anyone coming fresh to your story will assume every word should be pronounced the conventional way. If you have altered the stressed syllable there is no way a reader can know that, and they will struggle to read your story. A great test to see if your story works is to get someone who hasn't seen it before (and hasn't heard you reading it aloud) to read it aloud to you. If they struggle, or even hesitate at any point, you will know the rhythm isn't quite right yet.

Check out books by expert rhymers like Lynley Dodd and Juliette MacIver in local bookshops and libraries. These writers are skilled practitioners who spend months refining their rhythm and rhyme. Study the patterns they use.

And rhythm isn't just for rhyming stories, it is important for all writing. When rhythm is absent it should be a deliberate act to enhance your story, not an accidental omission which makes your work hard to read.

## Language

When I was a judge I saw a lot of examples of passive writing, the use of overly simple words, and a general absence of language techniques in the submissions.

Passive writing is dull, inert and distancing. Sentences like 'The dog was washed by Harriet' and, 'There were a lot of dead leaves on the ground,' become more direct and vigorous when written as, 'Harriet washed the dog,' or 'Dead leaves covered the ground.' We are there in the moment. While the passive voice has its place, active writing should dominate. It's also a good idea to avoid negative statements such as 'Josh was not often on time.' Instead write 'Josh was usually late.'

And although your audience is young, they love to be challenged with interesting words. Books are where children learn new words and discover how fun they can be. Don't be afraid to use interesting and colourful alternatives. A good rule of thumb is that it's safe to use a complex word as long as the sentence does not rely on it for meaning, and/or if the word is depicted in the illustration. Word play is also great, as is the use of language techniques like alliteration, assonance, metaphor, imagery, similes and onomatopoeia. Google is your friend here. There are plenty of great examples of all these techniques online if you are unsure about any of them.

Last but not least is having a fresh idea to write about. Some folk say there are no new stories left but I disagree. And if your idea *has* been done before, make sure you write about it in a fresh way. Read lots of picture books so you are familiar with what works and what has already been written about. The more you read, the better able you will be to write your own great picture book stories.

Happy writing, and best wishes for your submissions!!