

## Storylines Joy Cowley Award

### PICTURE BOOK TIPS from Joy Cowley

A picture book story is fun to write and hundreds of people are doing it. This is good news in that it increases the quality of stories chosen; but it also means we must carefully craft our ideas for picture books if we are to compete. It is actually very hard to create a first-rate picture book.

Sometimes good ideas are rejected because they haven't been developed in the best way. So, what are the dos and don'ts?

I will share with you what I have learned from experience:

1. There are 32 pages in most picture books, about 30 of these contain the story and pictures.
2. Length of picture book story? 800 words, more or less. 1200 words is probably too long, and 100 words too short. The story needs a plot that will give interesting picture development over 30 pages. That means a well-defined beginning, middle and end.
3. Who will read the story? I can't be vague about my readers' age. If I write for one child I know well, then I'll probably get story content and language right.
4. I should avoid rhyme. Sometimes rhyme can result in rambling and distorted language. But avoiding rhyme doesn't mean my text has to be boring. I can use rhythmic words, juicy words, language that will appeal to a young reader.
5. In telling a story, I must not talk down to children. Just as some adults adopt a special voice when speaking to a young child, so can authors be tempted to use what I call 'cuddly' language. My rule is to write with the respect I give adults, and at the same time stay with the child's experience of life and language.
6. I hope my story will be a PICTURE book. I do not try to dictate to the illustrator, whom I consider to be my co-author. I am nearly always delighted with the way the illustrator has brought my story to life.
7. I also avoid writing about animals that dress and act like humans. Beatrix Potter got away with this, and so did A.A. Milne but they might have difficulty today. Some publishers are okay with talking animals as long as they clearly represent the animals they are.
8. Reading and writing go together like the right shoe and left shoe. If I am trying to write picture books and am not a reader of books for children, I am seriously disadvantaged.
9. When I think I've finished my story, I do NOT send it to a publisher immediately. I leave it on the computer for at least a month. It's surprising how many mistakes I find when I see the story more objectively.
10. Last but not at all least: I can learn a lot in an afternoon, looking at picture books in the children's section of the library.