**WRITING FOR MIDDLE GRADE READERS**

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CHARACTERISTICS OF MIDDLE GRADE READERS

* Ages: 8-12 (Upper Middle Grade: 10-14)
* Grades: 3-8 (upper elementary school through early middle school)
* Some are avid readers; some are reluctant
* Accustomed to visual media of all sorts; might have short attention spans
* Intensely curious
* Prefer active over passive learning experiences
* Experiencing accelerated physical development
* Have ravenous appetites; may overtax digestive systems with large quantities of improper foods
* Are often erratic and inconsistent in their behavior
* Easily offended
* Tend to exaggerate
* Can be moody and restless
* Are often confused and frightened by new school settings
* Need frequent affirmation
* Are basically optimistic, hopeful
* Have a strong sense of fairness and justice

→ Several of these items are taken from “Characteristics of Middle Grade Students” by the Sacramento Department of Education.

MIDDLE GRADE FICTION

Word Count for Novels: 15,000-65,000 (fantasy: 65K-85K)

This category is sometimes broken down further into:

Lower MG (15-30K)

Middle MG (30-50K)

Upper MG (45-65K)

* + Protagonist is 10-13 years old
  + Narrative focus is on friends, family, and the character’s immediate world and his/her relationship to it
  + Characters react to what happens to them; minimal self-reflection
  + Clean & wholesome: no profanity, graphic violence, or sexuality
  + Content often deals with friendships, changes in family relationships, coming of age, school experiences, character issues, a growing awareness of the outside world (especially injustice and environmental issues), faith, and more
  + Content can deal with tough topics like homelessness, loss, disability, poverty
  + Characters are imperfect and relatable

MIDDLE GRADE NONFICTION

* Covers topics that are of interest to kids 8-12
* Often used in classrooms
* Often include a lot of art and graphics
* Require quality research
* Include back matter
* Often align with current events
* Come to life with the elements of fiction (Creative Nonfiction)

FIRST CHAPTER ESSENTIALS

1. Hook the reader.
2. Establish a relatable character by revealing (creatively) the character’s name and age or grade.
3. Set the scenes vividly and briefly with unique, memorable details.
4. Reveal the main character’s external PROBLEM.\*
5. Reveal what the main character WANTS.\*
6. Hint at the main character’s internal problem (aka what he NEEDS to learn or understand). This can be a character flaw or a misunderstanding or misbelief.\*
7. Weave in only the tiniest bit of relevant backstory, if any, to pique the reader’s curiosity.
8. Tap into universal emotions.
9. Use some humor, if possible.
10. Include the story’s Inciting Incident.

→ Some first chapters of middle grade novels will end with the Inciting Incident. Some will go on to include the following.

1. Show the main character’s initial reaction to the Inciting Incident.
2. Reveal the main character’s plan to address the problem of the story.
3. Set a ticking clock in motion.

→ \*For more information about the character’s PROBLEM, WANT, and NEED, see page 10 of *Save the Cat! Writes a Novel* by Jessica Brody.

→ Read the opening to *Love, Ruby Lavender* by Deborah Wiles and see how many of these elements you can find!

WRITING TIPS

* Read a ton of middle grade
* Don’t preach
* Don’t speak down to your readers; they are super smart and savvy
* Don’t let the adults in the story solve the main character’s problem or give sagely advice right before the climax of the story
* Don’t put issues like poverty, homelessness, disability, or cultural differences in bad lights
* Write tight
* Use active verbs and precise nouns
* Develop a fast-paced, active plot
* Create authentic characters kids can relate to
* Write dialogue that rings true for the age of the character
* Vary sentence structure
* Write active sentences not flat sentences
* Be smart about including technology; don’t date your manuscript
* End every chapter with a compelling hook to the next chapter
* Be mindful of the gatekeepers
* Remember to have fun!

LENGTHS OF SOME MIDDLE GRADE NOVELS

* *The Tiger Rising* by Kate DiCamillo: **19,369**
* *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate DiCamillo: **22,123** (26 short chapters, 846 wds/chap)
* *Starfish* by Lisa Fipps: **25,879** (novel in verse)
* *Tuck Everlasting* by Natalie Babbitt: **27,848** (136 pp, 25 chaps + prologue & epilogue, 209 wds/pg, 1000 wds/chap)
* *On the Far Side of the Mountain* by Jean Craighead George: **38,891** (170 pp, 15 chaps, 218 wds/pg, 2470 wds/chap)
* *How to (Almost) Ruin Your Summer* by Taryn Souders: **39,545**
* *The House That Lou Built* by Mae Respicio: **41,597**
* *Close to Famous* by Joan Bauer: **41,793**
* *Almost Home* by Joan Bauer: **43,003**
* *Olivia Bean, Trivia Queen* by Donna Gephardt: **46,831**
* *Coop Knows the Scoop* by Taryn Souders: **59,579**
* *Merci Suarez Changes Gears* by Meg Medina: **70,747**
* Add your favorites!

**RESOURCES FOR WRITING FOR MIDDLE GRADE READERS**

Accelerated Reader Book Find: [www.arbookfind.com](http://www.arbookfind.com). Look up word counts, publication information, and ATOS reading levels of published books.

Bradley, Fleur. “7 Tips for Developing a Compelling Middle-Grade Fiction Premise.” Writer’s Digest, Sept 8, 2020. <https://www.writersdigest.com/write-better-fiction/7-tips-for-developing-a-compelling-middle-grade-fiction-premise>.

Brody, Jessica. *Save the Cat! Writes a Novel.* Ten Speed Press, 2018.

Christensen, Evelyn. <http://evelynchristensen.com/index.html>. Up-to-date lists of children’s magazines and educational markets, plus articles and tips for writers of nonfiction for children.

Institute for Writers. *2023 Edition Magazine Market Guide for Children’s Writers.*

Jones, Amy, editor. *Children’s Writer’s and Illustrator’s Market 33rd Edition*. Writer’s Digest Books, 2022.

Kidlit411: [www.kidlit411.com](http://www.kidlit411.com). This blog contains a wealth of information and a curated list of blog posts and articles by topic. Scroll down to the “NONFICTION” icon.

Lamba, Marie. “The Key Differences Between Middle Grade vs Young Adult.” Writer’s Digest online. <https://www.writersdigest.com/write-better-fiction/the-key-differences-between-middle-grade-vs-young-adult>.

Maughan, Shannon. “Navigating Middle Grade Books.” Publisher’s Weekly, April 13, 2018. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/76625-navigating-middle-grade.html>.

Sacramento: California Department of Education. “Characteristics of Middle Grade Students.” *Caught in the Middle*, 1989. <https://www.mvschools.org/cms/lib/CA01001212/Centricity/Domain/152/Characteristics%20of%20Middle%20Grade%20Students.pdf>

Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI). *The Book: Essential Guide to Publishing for Children 2020.* \*Available to members only.

Underdown, Harold. “Writing, Illustrating, and Publishing Children’s Books: The Purple Crayon.” <https://www.underdown.org/> This website contains a wealth of information.

Wiles, Deborah. *Love, Ruby Lavender.* Clarion Books, 2005.