

Children’s Author, Children’s Author, What Do You See?

Writing For Children
taught by Julie Lavender,
author of

Strength for All Seasons: A Mom’s Devotional of Powerful Verses and Prayers and
Children’s Bible Stories for Bedtime (Zeitgeist/Penguin Random House)
365 Ways To Love Your Child: Turning Little Moments Into Lasting Memories (Revell)

“Let the little children come to me “ Matthew 19:14 NIV

Impacting a child’s life through the words you write can change the world, one little life at a time.

Your words have the potential to foster the creativity, imagination, and intelligence of an entire generation!

And, if you’re writing faith-based pieces for children – then those carefully crafted words have the ability to affect eternity, to turn little hearts and minds to Jesus for a lifetime of walking in His presence and the security of a Heavenly home for all of eternity.

A huge responsibility we shouldn’t take lightly!

In this class, we’ll talk about several ways to write for children: books, children’s magazines articles, children’s devotions, and curriculum.

Children’s Books

The specifics of children’s book categories changes over time and also differs within publishing houses. The numbers below are generic, but it’s always best to check out a publishing house’s website for their specs.

CATEGORY	AGE/GRADE	WORD COUNT
* Board Books	0-4; infant-preschool	0-100 (usually less)
* Picture Books	4-8, preschool-grade 3	0-500 to 600
* NF Picture Books	4-9; preschool-grade 4	1000-2000 (leans less)
* Leveled Readers	4-9; preschool-grade 4	50-2000

* Chapter Books	6-9; grades 1-3	1500-10,000
* Hi-Lo Books	9-11, grades 4-6	400-1200
* Middle Grade Novels	8-13; grades 3-8	10,000-40,000
* Young Adult (YA)	13-18; grades 8-12 (or beyond)	50,000-70,000

Board books are those adorable, hard-cover, sturdy books for infants and toddlers. Here's some of the characteristics of a board book.

- * sturdy thick cardboard cover

- * sturdy thick cardboard pages

- * word count ranges from no words at all to 100 words, but typically the word count is , much less than 100. In fact there may be just one or two words per page.

- * Most board books are 16 or 24 pages long.

- * Board books are typically written for kids from birth to age three or four.

- * Board books for little ones are often concept books, like colors or shapes or animals or counting.

- * Board books can be a simple story, as well, and are often about holidays or families or a particular event, like a birthday party.

- * Sometimes board books are wordless, sometimes they're written in rhyme, and sometimes they're written in short prose.

- * Many board books are also classified as novelty books, which means they have a special feature that makes them interactive. Some novelty book format examples are lift-the-flap, scratch and sniff, tactile, or peek-a-boo.

- * Board books typically sell well, because consumers love buying them for kids they love and for purchasing them to give as gifts to children for birthdays and other holidays, and as baby gifts to a new mom or dad.

- * Unfortunately for writers, a lot of board books are written in-house at a publishing house, but not all of them, of course.

* And, a little unfortunate for new writers, because of the popularity of board books even moreso now than ever, publishing houses are turning picture books into board books more and more, rather than accepting new storylines.

PICTURE BOOKS

This is the category people probably think of most often when referring to children's books. Picture books are those highly-illustrated books for kids, where the pictures often reveal as much or more of the story than the words themselves.

Some of the qualities of a picture book include:

- * May have a hard or soft cover, but inside pages are thinner cardstock.
- * Very distinctive art on every page
- * Illustrations are typically done by someone other than the author
- * Word count for picture books ranges from no words to about 500 to 600 words, and many only have 300 words. That's a more recent industry change because the number used to be 1000 words max.
- * Picture books are written with ages 4 to 8 in mind, so think preschool to third grade, approximately.
- * Though the words in a picture book are sparse, relatively speaking, the text is engaging, captivating, lively, and entertaining, so you have to say a lot with fewer words.
- * The story must contain all of the elements of good fiction, that means well-rounded characters (even if it's simplistic) who take part in a plot with a clear beginning that usually consists of some sort of conflict or problem to solve, a middle that contains an arc of the plot, and an ending that shows a clear resolution of the storyline.
- * The child in the story solves the problem, not an adult.
- * The story is told from a child's point of view.
- * Most picture books are 24 pages long, but other lengths include 32 pages, 16 pages, or 48 pages. Because of the way books are put together or "bound," this number is usually a multiple of 8.

NON-FICTION PICTURE BOOKS

These picture books are the ones you often think of that would be in a child's school library that are informative or educational and are often written as assignments to authors from publishing houses.

- * Most often will have a hard cover, called library binding, to allow for more frequent use by lots of kids.
- * Inside pages are thinner cardstock.
- * Very distinctive art on every page
- * Illustrations are typically done by someone other than the author, and are quite often photographs to accompany the text.
- * Nonfiction picture books are written for ages 4 to 9, so preschool to grade 4 and often correlate with the subjects being taught as state standards in a classroom.
- * Nonfiction picture books usually have a higher wordcount than fiction picture books, and range from 1000 to 2000 words, but again, the numbers are often lower than in years past.
- * Nonfiction picture books cover such topics as the sciences, history, biographies, and more.
- * Many NF picture books are written as work-for-hire books, or assignment books for the educational market. It's much harder for a newer author to break into this market.

LEVELED READERS

Leveled readers are those books written for emerging readers and are often classified by a certain level to fit the readers' abilities.

- * Leveled readers are also called "easy readers" or "early readers" or "emergent readers."
- * The word count of leveled readers is determined by the level of the book and range from 50 to 400 words for the new, young readers, and up to 2000 words for the upper grades
- * Usually, leveled readers have 32 or 48 pages.

* Leveled readers are written for ages 4 to 9, preschool to grade four, but most leveled readers are for the much younger, early reader.

* Leveled readers have easy vocabulary with lots of sight words.

* Leveled readers contain short words, short sentences, short paragraphs.

* Leveled readers are broken into short chapters, typically.

* Text is often repetitive, but always level-appropriate for emerging readers.

* The content of a leveled reader is simplistic, yet engaging and interesting.

* Leveled readers typically have less characters than picture books.

* The heavily-illustrated leveled reader books allow children to use context clues from the illustrations to help with vocabulary.

* Leveled readers are often smaller in size, 6 inches by 9 inches, and are oriented vertically.

* Leveled readers are rarely hardback books.

CHAPTER BOOKS

Chapter books help kids transition from picture books to middle grade novels and have very few pictures.

* Chapter books are written for kids ages 6 to 9, first grade to third grade.

* Chapter books have an average word count from 1500 words to 10,000 words.

* Chapter books range from 40 pages for the youngest reader to 80 or 100 pages for older reader.

* Words tell the story more so than pictures, with occasional pictures with each chapter maybe.

HI-LO BOOKS

Hi-Lo books are written to meet the needs of struggling readers. The books contain a high level of interest, but written for kids with a lower level of reading skills.

* Hi-Lo books are written for kids ages 9 to 11, grades 4-6.

* Hi-Lo books contain 400 to 1200 words.

* Hi-Lo books are geared towards the slightly-older child who struggles to read.

* Hi-Lo books center around topics that would be of interest to and engaging for a child in the fourth through sixth grade, but with shorter, simpler words and sentences.

* The sentence structure and the controlled vocabulary of a Hi-Lo book encourage the struggling reader to successfully read a book of interest to him or her.

* Hi-Lo books are often written as work-for-hire or assignment work.

MIDDLE GRADE NOVELS

Middle grade novels are often referred to as MG novels and are written for kids in the middle grades of school. (Be sure to think “middle grades” and not “middle school.”)

* Middle grade novels are written with the 9-13 year old in mind, grades 4 through 8.

* The protagonist of the story is typically slightly older than the reader, so maybe a 10 to 13 or 14 year old.

* Middle grade novels have a word count of 10,000-40,000.

* Middle grade novels range from 8 to 20 chapters.

* Middle grade novels focus on family and friends and how the main character fits into that immediate world.

* Middle grade novels deal with the emotions and settings and activities of real kids in the middle grade age range.

* Middle grade novels are often told in third person.

* Middle grade novels are often written as a series. Once kids get invested in the characters in a MG novel, they want additional stories involving those characters.

* For the most part, MG novels are clean and wholesome in the general market, with perhaps a first crush and/or kiss involved.

YOUNG ADULT NOVELS

The biggest distinction between young adult novels and middle grade novels is in the character arc. In a young adult book, characters discover how they fit in the broader world, not just their immediate circle of family and friends. By the end of the story, the teenage characters mature into adult-like thought processes with adult-like problem solving skills.

- * Young Adult novels are also called YA novels.
- * YA books are written for ages 13 to 16, and often 18 year olds.
- * YA books are read by teens in the eighth grade through twelfth and beyond.
- * YA books contain between 50 to 70,000 words.
- * YA books have between 120 pages to 300, and sometimes more.
- * YA books' protagonist and other characters are older than the reader, like MG novels, with characters ages ranging from 14 to 18.
- * YA books are often written in first person.
- * In the general market, YA books often have adult-like content that includes violence, romantic relationships at deeper levels, and profanity.

Genre examples:

Nonfiction, fiction, religious, fairy tales, folktales, adventure, mystery, horror, fantasy, science fiction, historical fiction, biographical, and more.

To succeed as a children's book author: read copious books in the genre and category you want to write and spend a great deal of time with kids.

Elements of a story:

Character

Setting

Plot

Conflict

Theme

Advanced elements of a story:

Point of view

Tone

Style

Types of descriptive imagery:

Personification

Alliteration

Assonance

Simile

Metaphor

Onomatopoeia

To rhyme or not to rhyme?

Edit. Read. Repeat.

Share your manuscript with a critique partner or group.

Put manuscript aside to “rest,” then look at it again in week or more.

One-Sheet components

Blurb about the book

Author photograph

Author bio

Contact info

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Book Proposal components

Cover Letter

Header or Footer

Table of Contents

Overview

Format

Author's Biography

Speaking Opportunities

Prior publications and sales history

Platform

Endorsements

Comparative works

Target Audience

Marketing and publicity

Chapter summaries OR Synopsis

Sample chapters OR Entire manuscript

Writing Children's Devotions

Devotion definition: a devotion is a mini-lesson wrapped up in a clever package that includes word pictures to help us relate to the lesson personally and apply it to our own lives.

Devotions are: brief, succinct, and have one main point or focus

Devotion paint a picture that appeals to the readers' senses and helps them pull out a nugget of wisdom.

For today's discussion, we'll talk about these two topics specifically:

***Writing Devotions for an Established Publication:** writing and submitting devotions for a specific, established market or publication.

***Writing a Devotional:** writing your own devotional book to present to an editor.

I. Writing Devotions for an Established Publication

PRAY first.

Check the *Christian Writers Market Guide* section for children's magazines seeking devotions.

Decide which publication you want to submit to. Study guidelines.

Most devotions have certain key components. The essentials of almost every devotion are these:

Title

Verse (just one verse)

Body

- includes an illustration that begins with a hook to draw the reader in, continues with an anecdote to elaborate, and ends with some sort of takeaway

Prayer

In addition, some devotions include an action step – something the writer hopes the reader will do or change after reading the devotion. Sometimes the action step is included in the body in a simple sentence or two. Or, sometimes the action step has its own heading.

Some devotions also include a suggestion to read additional, related Scripture, and other parts.

Each devotion has a specific point the writer hopes to convey to the reader. That may show up as the takeaway, but not exactly in those words. Keep in mind the purpose of your devotion as you craft each of the essential components.

Because devotions have such a small word count, every single word is important. Write such that the reader feels the story with every sense – sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch – but choose your words carefully.

Sight paints the scene in the reader's mind.

Sounds tune the reader's ears to the soundtrack of the event.

Touch defines the setting.

Smells invoke memories.

Taste summons past experiences.

Leave out unnecessary words. Use strong verbs and nouns and leave out the adjectives and adverbs. Make every word count.

Use active voice instead of passive, which you hear in almost every writing course!

Grab the reader! Evoke an emotion – make them laugh or cry or ponder.

Avoid clichés and stories that are way over-done.

Write with one focus, one purpose in mind. Present one eternal truth or message in the devotion.

Keep your audience in mind – remember that you're writing for children?

When your thoughts are written on the paper and you've edited for word count, check for these details:

Is the title brief and to the point, matching the message the reader will get with the illustration?

Does the Bible verse match the illustration and takeaway?

Does the body of the devotion, the illustration flow well and fulfill the purpose you set out to write for this devo? Do you have strong verbs and concrete nouns and no extraneous words?

Does it grab the reader and evoke emotion? Will it hold their attention? Does it teach the lesson or impart the truth you set out to convey?

Does it have a strong ending with a takeaway for the reader?

Is the reader challenged to make a change because of the takeaway? Does it offer an example to live by? Does it encourage them to forgive, honor the Lord, be a good steward, help a neighbor?

Is the action step included? (Not all devos have an action step, but many of them do. Make sure the call to action relates to the topic and takeaway in the devo.)

Is the prayer sincere, heartfelt, reverent, and match the purpose of the devotion?

When you've checked and rechecked and triple-checked your devotion, put it aside for several days to "let it rest." Work on other devotions while that one rests a bit. Mostly because each publisher usually requests that you send in three to five devotions at a time. You'll want to be preparing other devotions to send as a group.

After a piece has "rested, pull it back out to read again. Check for punctuation and grammar and make sure the devotion delivers the point you planned.

Share the devo with a writing partner or critique group for their input. Make any changes you feel necessary after someone else reads the devo, then get ready to submit it.

Remember, you've targeted that devo to a specific magazine, so it should follow the guidelines to the letter. If it doesn't, the editor will toss it, no matter how great it is!

For example, if the guidelines ask for an "additional reading" suggestion for each devotion, make sure you include that in your devo.

Again, follow the guidelines to the letter, and send off your selection of devotions to that publisher!

Once you've sent off a selection of devotions to one publisher, then find another one and do the same!

And then, of course, be ready to celebrate with ice cream when you get an acceptance! In fact, I typically celebrate with ice cream when I send out a submission, because, by golly, that's hard work!!

II. Writing a Devotional

If you plan to write an entire book of devotions, again, the first step is always PRAYER! Ask God to guide your thoughts and words that will become a devotional book that will change hearts for Him.

Then the next thing you'll want to do is

Decide on a Theme

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*What are you passionate about?

*What's your current interest?

*What's your expertise?

*What felt-need do you see missing from the children's devotional market?

*What holes do you see on the devotional shelf?

Once you've established your theme or focus, you'll need to

Choose the Length

Do you plan a year-long devotional? 365 Days?

52 Weeks? 100 Day? 40 Day? 31 Day?

Write 5 to 10 Devotions that fit the Theme

If you're writing your own devotional, you can decide which elements you want to include. But, again, most devotions contain these elements:

***Scripture**

Choose a scripture that best suits the story or anecdote or lesson that you plan to include as the main body of the devotion. Be careful to quote the scripture accurately and give the version, too.

***Body**

Share an anecdote, brief story, powerful lesson, or piece of historical information that relates to the chosen Scripture, as well as the overarching theme of the book. Word count for this can vary in a book, from 100 words to 250 words to 300 to perhaps even 500. Write tight. Be brief and to the point. Think succinct. Pack a powerful punch in as few words as possible.

***Reflection**

This could be in the form of a question or two, to help the reader reflect on what they just read. Or, it could be in the form of a sentence or two summary of the body of the devotion.

***Important Truth or Takeaway**

Not all devos include this part, but the Important Truth or Important Thought or Key Point could be as simple as a phrase or very brief sentence that spotlights the main idea of the devotion. It's the "take-away" you want the reader to stamp on their heart from reading your particular passage for the day.

***Prayer**

The prayer can be the actual words you encourage the reader to pray aloud, related to the message you intended to convey in the story. Or, you can guide the reader with suggested words and have the reader author their own prayer.

***Call to Action**

Not all devos explicitly list a call to action, but you could suggest an activity to further personalize the devotion.

And, some longer devotionals might have a craft to go with each day. Or a recipe. Or a "This moment in history" sidebar.

If you're writing your own devotional, you can get as creative as you want!

Decide exactly which components you want to include with each devotion. Write five to ten samples. Read. Polish. Edit. Read again. Polish. Edit. Share with a critique group. Put it aside for several days or a week. Edit again. Pray again. And then craft a query letter and proposal for your devotional manuscript to send off, or, craft a one-sheet to go with the samples and take the package with you to a conference to speak with an editor.

And, while you're waiting for a response, it goes without saying, keep reading other devotionals as mentor texts to keep learning more and more about writing devotionals.

Writing Articles for Children's Magazines

1) PRAY!!

2) Read Submission Guidelines

Resources: Writers Market Guide

Christian Writers Market Guide

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Do they accept freelance submissions?

What is the word count for each type of article in the magazine?

How far ahead should you submit?

Does the magazine want queries first or completed article?

3) Start small, but aim big

Consider submitting to “smaller” magazines or non-paying ones to establish writing credits, but don’t be afraid to reach out to bigger ones, too.

4) Study sample articles in target publication

What subjects were covered recently?

What is the style and tone of the magazine articles?

How do they begin and end?

5) Choose a story idea or topic

6) Write article.

7) Let manuscript “rest”

8) Edit

Check for clarity.

Check for punctuation, grammar, or spelling errors.

Have a critique partner read the article.

9) Write query letter

Be sure to find out acquisition editor’s name with correct spelling.

Start with lede paragraph – the ‘hook.’

Next paragraph is the nut graf – the paragraph summarizing what you’re offering in the article.

The ‘body’ comes next – two (or maybe three) paragraphs that give some examples from the story.

Credentials and bio come next.

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Closing paragraph – show a tidbit of your knowledge of the magazine through a similar article, mention simultaneous submission, ask if you can submit

10) Send query

Send simultaneous submissions, but be sure to personalize each one.

11) Write or send article

Hopefully, the editor says YES and you can complete the article to send in. If you get one of those inevitable-at-times rejections, then move on to another publication

12) Celebrate!

Acceptance or rejection – celebrate! You've accomplished a lot, either way!

Writing Curriculum for Children

Use Children's Writers Market Guide to find publishing houses that publish curriculum for children.

There aren't many of these opportunities available, but the few that are out there are worth looking into.

Check your denominational publishing house, and look into others, also.

For example, check these websites:

Lifeway.com

Group.com (not accepting freelancers at this moment)

Follow directions on website for submitting, but most want a query letter with your credentials and past writing experiences.

Some will have an application process to go through with sample writing activities.

Other children's writing opportunities:

Plays and scripts for the children's ministry of your church

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Homeschooling lesson plans

Public library programs

Volunteer writer for your child's classroom

CONNECT WITH ME!

I have a couple of favors, and then I want to ask you to share your writing successes with me!

I had the pleasure of being a guest on the Focus on the Family Broadcast last year. I'd be so very honored if you'd listen to the broadcast, because each "view" encourages more opportunities for writers like me/us to be part of their show! Here's that link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ti_1-eOtcjA&t=951s

Would you please consider checking out my books to give as a gift to yourself or someone special? And if you do, would you consider writing a brief, honest review on Amazon?

Strength for All Seasons: A Mom's Devotional of Powerful Verses and Prayers (Zeitgeist/Penguin Random House) <https://www.amazon.com/Strength-All-Seasons-Devotional-Powerful-ebook/dp/B0CD3JLYNC>

Children's Bible Stories for Bedtime (Zeitgeist/Penguin Random House) <https://www.amazon.com/Childrens-Bible-Stories-Bedtime-Faith/dp/0593436164>

365 Ways to Love Your Child: Turning Little Moments into Lasting Memories (Revell) <https://www.amazon.com/365-Ways-Love-Your-Child/dp/0800738845>

I'd love to hear about your children's writing success stories!!! Please connect with me at julielavenderwrites.com and on social media to tell me about ANY of your writing successes! I love talking about writing with fellow writers! It's my joy to pray for writer friends and encourage them, too! Let's connect!

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<https://twitter.com/JLavenderwrites>

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