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: up to 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)

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

* *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate DiCamillo: **22,123** (26 short chapters, 846 wds/chap)
* *Edgar Allan’s Official Crime Investigation Notebook* by Mary Amato: **25,756**
* *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)
* *The House That Lou Built* by Mae Respicio: **41,597**
* *Road Trip Rescue* by Becca Weirwille: **44,000**
* *Crispin and the Cross of Lead* by Avi: **48,194**
* *The Mystery of the Radcliffe Riddle* by Taryn Souders: **55,120**
* *The Bark of the Bog Owl* by Jonathan Rogers: **56,861**
* *Spy School Goes North (Spy School # 11)* by Stuart Gibbs: **61,142**
* *Merci Suarez Changes Gears* by Meg Medina: **70,747**
* *Mission Manhattan (City Spies #5)* by James Ponti: **71,773**
* *Greenglass House* by Kate Mitford: **98,938**
* Add your favorites!

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 (sometimes this is in Chapter Two).

→ 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 *Save the Cat! Writes a Young Adult Novel* by Jessica Brody.

**RESOURCES FOR WRITING FOR MIDDLE GRADE**

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

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