



# Module 1: A Course on How to Write Children's Books

- What is it about writing children's books that appeals to you?
- Clearing up the myth that writing for kids is easier than writing for adults
- Some other common misconceptions about writing books for children
- What does writing a children's book actually entail?

Before starting out on this course it is important to consider why you want to write children's books in the first place.

This chapter will help you examine your motives and determine whether writing is the career for you.

## **We will be discussing the following important points:**

- What is it about writing children's books that appeals to you?
- Clearing up the myth that writing for children is easier than writing for adults
- Some other common misconceptions about writing books for children
- What does writing a children's book actually entail?
- Opportunities and career choices for children's writers

## **1.1 Asking Yourself Your True Motives for Wanting to Write**

# Children's Books



**There are certainly some questions you should ask yourself about what you expect out of your new career as a children's writer.**

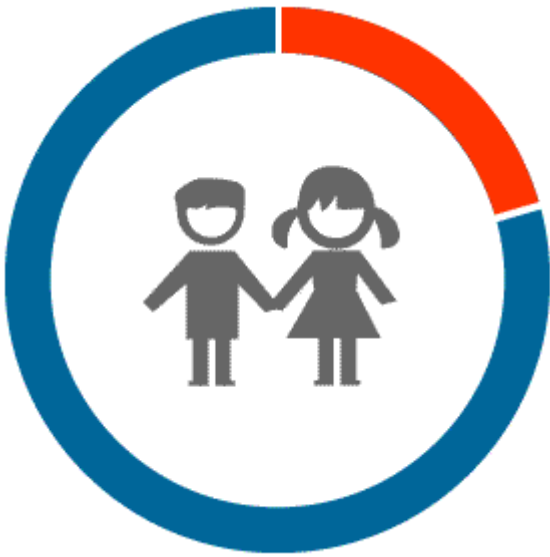
If you are looking for a quick and easy way to make money then you should definitely look for ideas elsewhere. Whilst it is certainly possible to become successful and rich from writing books, most authors will never achieve this. Similarly if you believe it to be your path to fame and fortune, then think again.

Many children's writers experience success in the fact that they get a book or two published, but few enjoy success in the same way as authors such as Roald Dahl, Enid Blyton, or J.K. Rowling. Of course it is great to have ambitious aspirations but it is also important to be realistic about your goals and not expect to have success immediately, or even ever.

To embark on a career as a children's writer you need to have a passion for telling stories to children. You need to be dedicated to the art of weaving words that paint pictures in young people's heads and stretch their imaginations. Your main concern should be to just have children read and enjoy your books, rather than focusing on the financial gain you hope to achieve. Having a career as a children's writer can be hugely rewarding but the rewards come from sharing your stories and seeing the smiles and happiness that result from children reading your books, not from counting the money you made from each sale.

When setting out as a children's author it may mean living more modestly for several years or even the rest of your life. However doing something that you are passionate about and enjoying the career you have chosen should far outweigh the downsides of starting out as a new children's writer.

**FACT**



Around £2.2 billion is spent on books each year in the UK, of which a fifth goes on children's books.

*Express.co.uk*

## 1.2 Are Your Ideas Good Enough?



**Often people with children or nieces and nephews will make up stories and write books for them.**

You enjoy coming up with silly characters based around things and people you both know and it is easy to engage the children you are surrounded by with your funny and personal stories. You may think that because your stories are successful with those that you know, then others will like them too. However, making up a story for children that love and dote on you personally will differ hugely from writing a story book for children you have never met. You do not have the opportunity beforehand to warm yourself to them, to explain where the characters came from, to relate the characters to their life, to perform the book to them with funny voices and actions. All this will have to come across in the substance of what you write and from the energy of the adults that end up reading your book to children.

Writing a children's book is not as easy as cobbling together a few quick characters and a simple plot.

Even though the children that love you might laugh hysterically and enjoy your tales, reaching out to

parents and children that you do not know requires a lot more work and detail.

To start a career in children's writing you should love reading children's books yourself.

Maybe you have children yourself that you read to, maybe you read to your friends' and family's children, or maybe you help out by reading books to children at your local school or library. Whatever the case you should have some existing experience and interest in reading and sharing books and stories to children. You need to see their reactions, listen to what questions they have and see how they understand and relate to the story.

## 1.3 Writing for Kids is Easier than Writing for Adults...Right?



**Wrong.**

You should also consider why you specifically want to write books aimed at children.

Aspiring authors may think that writing books for children is easier than writing books for adults but this is certainly not the case. Yes, the plot will usually be simpler and the length of the book shorter, but there is also a lot more to think about. Firstly, you need to pick an age group. There are many different types of children's books aimed at the different age groups, so you need to figure out which audience you are going to target. We will cover all the different types of books for various age ranges in another chapter, however, it is important to realise that for each age range you will need to cater your vocabulary and complexity of your plot to your target readers' ages. You need to come up with a balance that means they are challenged but not confused.

Writing books for children can be difficult simply because we are not children any more. Our grasp of reality is different, our acceptance of information we are given is different and our sense of humour is different. Therefore, you must put in more effort to research your target age group to discover what makes them tick, what makes them laugh, what they believe in, and what they relate to.

You need to think back to when you were a child and read your favourite books again. Do you still find them entertaining and engaging and funny? Is what you liked about them then what you still like now?

You also have to grab a child's attention and keep them engaged throughout the whole book. Forget long descriptions or chunks of back story as a child's attention span is a lot shorter than an adult's. You need to work hard to create conflict and tension; maintaining it throughout the story. Where an adult might have the mind-set that even if the book is a little description-heavy and slow-going they

will stick with it and see if it improves, a child is more likely to discard it immediately and pick up something different.

Another difficulty when writing for children, depending on the age group you are targeting, is that the books are often read by parents and teachers as well. That means the books need to have some kind of appeal to adults also. This is difficult to achieve but many good authors have done so, even when writing books for very young children.

Think of books like *The Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter, *A Bear Called Paddington* by Michael Bond or *The Cat in the Hat* by Dr Seuss. They are regularly read and enjoyed by children and adults alike.

When adults are also engaged in your story they are a lot more likely to read your book over and over again to their children, as well as to buy further books that you write. However, appealing to both your selected age range of children as well as their parents and teachers is a tough skill to develop.

## **1.4 Other Misconceptions that People have about Writing for Children**

**The books mentioned above are all heavily illustrated and the pictures are almost as important to the reading experience as the text is.**

**It is not all about words.**

Some books for very young readers are only pictures with maybe the odd word, so in these cases the illustrations are even more important. Unless you are a talented artist yourself you will need to have an illustrator involved to complete your book. Many believe that it is the author's job to choose the perfect artist to go with their story, but if you are planning or hoping to get published it is in fact up to the publisher to select the illustrator.

This is because the publisher will have a wide range of experience in what works when it comes to illustrations, as well as the list of contacts to be able to find and work with the right people. You are obviously not going to be in this position but it can still be hard giving up your 'baby' to be tampered with by artists and illustrators that you are not involved with.

**Your story does not necessarily need a moral to it**

Another common misconception when it comes to writing children's books is that the story needs to have some kind of moral or must teach the reader something.

Many old fables and fairy tales work this way but these days most children want something fresher and newer. If they sense they are being preached at it will usually turn them off the book completely. Morals can still be presented but in a subtle way; children are clever enough to reach their own conclusions without having it rammed down their throats.

Also, it is not realistic to always have good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. Unfortunately life is not like this and children realise it from a young age. Let your

readers figure out the implications of your story for themselves without having to reiterate it with sentences like, 'So the moral of the story is...'.

## 1.5 What is Involved in Writing a Children's Book?

**When embarking on your new career as a children's writer you need to understand that writing the book is just the tip of the iceberg with regards to the amount of work involved.** Once you have come up with a plot, characters, a setting etc. and have written your first draft, there is still a lot to do.

You need to spend time honing it to perfection and may rewrite the entire book several times. You need to get a lot of feedback and criticism to then edit it again, again and again!

When the book is finally as good as you can possibly make it you need to decide whether you are going to try and get published, or whether you want to self-publish. The latter may be suitable if you have sufficient funding, are confident in the success of your book and do not want to wait for the long process of being accepted by a publisher. Self-publishing may also be suitable for those writing a book as more of a hobby, to give out to children they know as presents, etc. Whatever the reason for self-publishing you need to be aware that it will cost you a lot of money in both the publishing costs as well as marketing strategies, and there is no guarantee you will ever see that money back again.

Going to a publisher takes the money worries away from you but it also means months of waiting and hoping, with the possible crushing disappointment of receiving rejection letters. You must be patient and thick-skinned in order to wait for replies, deal with rejections, and carry on pushing your book until someone accepts it. There are many qualities writers must possess and we will discuss these more in the following chapter.

## 1.6 Career Opportunities for Children's Writers

**The main opportunity that most people think of relating to a job as a children's writer is to write books, get them published and sold in book shops.**

However there are a number of other ways it is possible to get work.

### **Online opportunities**

There are many online opportunities for writers which include writing children's articles and e-books. These jobs may not be as interesting as writing your own book but will allow you to get a lot of practice and experience as well as some cash while you are writing your masterpiece.

### **Children's magazines**

Writing articles for children's magazines and websites is also a great way to get started in the business, gain experience, and get used to aiming your writing at different ages ranges of children.

The pay is usually not very good but it is regular, unlike writing books. Therefore it is a good backup to have until your books start getting published.

### **Writing competitions**

There are also many writing competitions you can enter which are fun to compete in and where you may receive cash prizes. It is interesting to read the other entries and analyse your work against the winning pieces to see how they differ. Reading as many other authors as possible and comparing your own writing to them is a sure way to improve your writing skills.

### **In Summary**

There is much more to writing a children's book than you might originally imagine, and a lot of it is not to do with the writing part at all.

Dealing with publishers and trying to market your book can be harder and more time consuming than writing the book itself.

There is also a lot of competition which means that your creation really needs to stand out and have something unique; something that other books aimed at the same age range don't offer. When starting out as a children's writer it is a good idea to get as much experience as possible by applying for online jobs, writing articles for children's magazines, and entering writing competitions.

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