Chapter One

In the Beginning

Anybody who shifts gears when he writes for children is likely to wind up stripping his gears.

—E.B. White

The Art in the Process

Most people think writing for children is easier than writing for adults. Just take a good story, simplify the plot, round the sharp edges, throw in a moral and use plain language. Thousands of writers turn out stories using this recipe. But these writers don't sell their stories to publishers. Children are sophisticated, savvy readers. They reject sermons. They avoid condescension. And they resent a dumbed-down attitude.

Storytelling is an art. And like any other art, it has rules. Picasso was trained in classical art before he became a cubist. In the beginning, he was taught to draw a bowl of grapes that looked like a bowl of grapes. Once he mastered perspective and line and shading, he could create any number of variations on that still life by juxtaposing the elements, turning around dimensions or stacking the third (unseen) dimension on top of the first. But even when he did so, he drew on the fundamentals of his classical training.

The same principle applies to crafting stories for children. Whether you're writing a traditional novel or an outasight, never-been-done, experimental

book, the essence of storytelling remains the same. A good story flows from a solid understanding of writing and structure, along with a confident grasp of character and plot and dialogue. Once you've mastered the fundamentals, you can follow the rules, break the rules or create new ones. But whatever you do, you will always have a basic foundation to build on.

This book deals with fundamentals. We'll look at story ideas, style and structure. We'll explore what makes a character memorable and what makes the reader keep turning the pages. We'll talk about beginning, middle and end; about premise, theme and tone; about dialogue and point of view; conflict and structure; plot and subplot. We'll also talk about the importance of choosing a voice that enhances your story and the power of using the five senses to add texture and authenticity to that story. We'll examine how all these elements not only apply to children's literature but how they can apply to the creation of a viable and memorable children's book—a published book with your name on it.

That Was Then

Startled, you wake up in a cave on the side of a rugged ravine. The fading embers of the fire illuminate pictures of bear, bison and deer painted on rock walls that arch overhead. You hear an ominous growl. Red eyes glare at you in the dim light as you push your infant daughter behind you and grope for the spear. Your fingers tighten around the smooth oak shaft of the weapon. Moving into a crouching position, you find your balance and raise your arm. Suddenly, the massive shadow lunges toward you, and you hurl the spear. A wild shriek splits the silence of the dawn.

Later that morning, you huddle around a twig-fed fire seeking refuge from the dark of the night. Still shaking, you tell the story of the bear to the people gathered around you. You tell that tale from beginning to end, describing your fear and your miraculous escape from the jaws of a monster in breathless detail. For in ancient days, when life pulsed with magic and mystery, storytelling commanded a critical place in the life of a clan.

Four thousand years ago, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* mesmerized Babylonians. Almost three thousand years ago, Homer created the stories we call *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, capturing the imaginations of Greeks with

tales of the Trojan War. In early eighth-century England, the exploits of Beowulf captivated the hearts and minds of Anglo-Saxons. In fact, the New Verse Translation of the story by Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney has recently enchanted a twenty-first-century audience. The power of the oral tradition has given birth to *The Arabian Nights*, *Hamlet* and *Cinderella*. And it has celebrated the exploits of King Arthur and Captain Kidd, Pocahontas and Pancho Villa.

Stories that began as tales passed from one generation to the next were eventually recorded on clay tablets and papyrus, on vellum and paper—a priceless gift from our ancestors.

Throughout history, story has honored our past, enlightened our present and envisioned our future. Our forebears communicated knowledge, accumulated wisdom and commemorated common experience through the magic of words. They created myths and educated children. They also entertained crowds. Story has given birth to wars and provided the building blocks of peace. Story has forecast dangers, vilified enemies and celebrated heroes. Story has also illuminated our common humanity.

This Is Now

Not much has changed in twenty thousand years. We still look to story for excitement, wisdom and comfort. And, I believe, we look to story for a connection to our past. Our ancient past. Story reaches beyond the written word to create an unconscious continuity with our earliest ancestors. And, in doing so, we honor where we came from, who we are and what we can become.

Helen Keller—blind, deaf and mute from the age of sixteen months—learned her first word when she was seven years old. Later, as an adult and noted educator, she described her wordless early world as "an unconscious but conscious time of nothingness . . . a dark, silent imprisonment. I did not know that I knew aught, or that I lived or acted or desired."

It is a privilege to write books. And it is especially a privilege to write books for children. Don't let anyone ever tell you that writing for children is a lesser art.

When you write a book for a child, you give him or her words—you give a voice to the voiceless. You open new worlds, introduce new ways of

thinking and lift that child closer to the light. This is the power and purpose of story. And this is the gift the storyteller can give.

Art and Craft

Some people are born with the gift of storytelling. You know them: friends who can talk about the most mundane encounter and capture your attention. They know just when to pause, when to draw out the details and when to deliver the punch line. They've got an instinct for story. Narrative comes naturally to them. Even if we're not among those fortunate few blessed with this inherent talent, most of us know a good story when we see or hear or read one.

Storytelling is not only a gift. It is an art. A craft.

Art involves instinct as well as an appreciation for form and structure. Most of us have that instinct. And if we don't, we can cultivate it.

Craft involves technique. Craft has rules. If a potter doesn't center the clay on the potter's wheel, he can't throw a pot. If a cabinetmaker doesn't measure the wood carefully, cut corners at the proper angle or join those corners correctly, she can't build a level table. What the potter and cabinetmaker produce may be art. But they could not produce that art without craft.

In craft, it's the process that matters.

That's what this book is about.

Process.

Chapter Two

Discovering Your Story

Good stories work on metaphoric and symbolic, as well as literal levels. Children filter stories through their unique history and imagination, using them in ways we can not possibly understand or even imagine. Stories are food for the soul.

—Frank Clancy

Inspirations

I hear it all the time. "I've got these great stories. My children can't get enough of them. I'd love to put them in a book." Often such a statement is accompanied by an offer for me to write the stories. I tell the speaker in a gentle way that these bedtime treats belong to his imagination, not mine.

The fact is, we all have great stories in us.

Where do writers get their ideas? How do they pull their stories out of the ether and give them form? There is no special magic here, no right way to create stories, no single way to approach material. There are as many facets to a story as there are people to imagine it.

You may think you don't have enough good ideas for a viable children's book. But you're wrong. There are countless ways to generate ideas. You can reach into your own past or into the pasts of your grandparents. You can talk with friends, listen to conversations between kids on a playground, ask your own children what events in their childhoods have been most memorable, visit schools, reminisce with someone you meet on a plane, ask your elderly neighbor what it was like when she was an adolescent or look at photo albums of your own childhood to help recall the days when you were growing up.

Just as there are many ways to access stories, there are many ways to contribute to the care and feeding of our literary muse. We'll examine a variety of techniques to jump-start your story-telling engine. And we'll make sure you know how to keep that engine humming as you move from one book to the next.

Remembrance of Things Past

If we don't get seeds for our stories from something outside ourselves, we might recall incidents from our childhoods that inspire us.

That happened to me. One hot summer day when I was nine years old, my friend Patty was riding her bicycle and her barefoot brother was riding on the back of her bike. As Patty pedaled down the elm-covered street on her bicycle, her brother's foot brushed against the spokes of the wheel and—blech! you guessed it—the spokes cut off one of his toes.

As if this disaster weren't bad enough, at the same time her brother was being rushed to the hospital emergency room, Patty went in search of his severed toe. After scouring the leafy street, she not only found the toe, she saved it in a matchbox.

In no time at all, the toe turned black and wrinkled. Blessed with a generous nature, Patty made her wizened trophy available for our rapt inspection whenever we wished, doubling the preadolescent traffic in her house and elevating her status to neighborhood legend.

Most kids just looked at the toe. The brave kids touched it. Needless to say, Patty's parents were unaware of the cotton-wrapped treasure hidden under their daughter's bed, all of us understanding it would be best to deny the grown-ups knowledge of this particular secret.

Disgusting as this story might sound, my writing partner, Muff Singer, and I used this incident as the inspiration for our comic chapter book called *The World's Greatest Toe Show*—the opening line of which is, "The Canal Street Club wouldn't have caused so much trouble if Emily Anderson hadn't saved her father's toe in a matchbox."

Almost anything, no matter how outlandish, can be turned into a book. Everyone's childhood has incidents—comic or tragic, outrageous or

ordinary—that contain the seeds of a first-rate story. Even a true-life tale of a severed toe. Finding a way to transform that incident into a story, as well as putting it into a viable form that kids will want to read, is both the challenge and the pleasure of writing.

The Magic Hour

Another place to find story ideas is in the Magic Hour. In the film business, the Magic Hour is what directors call the time before the sun sets. The light is soft, and the sun has a warm glow that flatters faces and makes scenes more visually appealing.

In the writing business, the Magic Hour falls at that time between sleeping and waking. The time when we drift without judgment, when unconscious thoughts bubble up to the surface without interruption from our conscious minds.

I get some ideas for stories when I'm in bed at night. But I'm usually so tired by the time my head hits the pillow I'm asleep before inspiration has the opportunity to knock on my story-dreaming door.

For me, a better time for creative thought is when I first awaken in the morning. Those floating moments between sleeping and waking invite me to drift, to let my mind wander over the tale I've been tossing around in my head or the character that's walked onto the stage of my imagination and refuses to disappear.

Whether it's at night, in the morning or in the middle of the day, we all experience our own renditions of the Magic Hour. The secret of writing well is not only to recognize that moment but to take advantage of it.

Opening Up to the Magic Hour

- Remember to breathe slowly and deeply. Breathe deep into your belly, yoga style, expanding both your chest and your belly as you inhale.
- Relax your entire body. Make sure your arms and legs are loose and your stomach is free of tension.
- Allow your mind to drift over your story. If you've got the seed of an idea, let it float free inside your imagination.

- Avoid waking up and being too alert. Dozing is all right.
- Drift. The object is to be open to random thoughts. Don't worry about making sense. Don't try to focus on anything specific.
- Put your internal judge in the closet. The goal is unimpeded access to your unconscious.
- Watch what floats into your mind. Make a conscious effort to put your thoughts on the back burner of your imagination where they continue to simmer as you go about your day.
- Keep a notepad nearby. Write down ideas that pop into your head, no matter how silly they seem.

The Creative Nap

In the early eighties when my partner, Rita Golden Gelman, and I were writing our pseudonymous series of Which Way and Secret Door books, Rita would fly into town, settle in my guest room, and we would get to work. For days on end, we'd write without a break.

The books we had contracted to write were "branching" books, print precursors of hyperlinked stories you see on Web sites today. The plotting was demanding and complicated. Each book for middle-grade readers had twenty or thirty primary plot lines and as many as forty endings. Constructing the stories—coming up with multiple plots and endless situations—was a task not made easier by the fact that we were writing on a typewriter and not a computer. We did have a system, however.

First we would lay out our central themes and plot points. Then I'd sit in front of the typewriter, close my eyes, take a few deep breaths and allow my imagination to do its work.

Indebted to that magic called the creative process, I'd spin out one tale after another. When I'd get stuck, I'd turn to Rita.

"What now?" I'd ask. "What does the hero do next?"

"How about if you have him find a buried treasure? Or, what if the pirates chase him into the cave?"

"That's it!" I'd say, turning back to the typewriter.

Day after day we produced one multiple-choice story after another. As soon as I wrote a page, I would hand it to Rita for her to rewrite, edit and organize. In spite of the fact that we were functioning as a well-

oiled story machine, every afternoon around two or three o'clock I would become inordinately sleepy. This sinking spell usually coincided with the moment in my creative day when my well of ideas ran dry.

In the beginning I struggled to stay awake, calling on the standard arsenal of pick-me-up tricks: a quick walk, a cup of espresso or brisk Irish tea, a piece of dark chocolate. But no matter how hard I tried or how much coffee and chocolate I ingested, nothing worked. My bed was fifteen feet from my desk, and all I wanted to do was sleep. Finally I gave in to my craving.

Every afternoon I would tell Rita to wake me up in forty-five minutes, then I'd lie down, sack out and take advantage of the Magic Hour. Sometimes I slept. Sometimes I drifted. But always I would awaken refreshed and ready to turn out more pages.

The Quick Snooze

Work is an excellent excuse for dozing off in the middle of the day. Einstein, Edison and Churchill all believed in the power of the nap. And their creativity is the stuff of legends.

I'm happy to follow in the footsteps of the masters. In fact, I've gotten some of my best ideas during the Magic Hour when I lie down, close my eyes, and forget about all the things I have to do and all the errands I have to run. Even if it's for fifteen or twenty minutes, I've learned to profit from taking a nap.

Ever since writing the Which Way books, I've called on the services of the Quick Snooze whenever I'm stuck on a book or a story line or even a phrase. Sometimes I don't go so far as moving over to the bed to lie down. I put my feet on my desk, lean back in my chair and close my eyes. Ninety percent of the time, if I open myself up to possibility—if I don't try to make something happen, but allow it to happen—I find a solution.

The Creative Nap is a kissing cousin of meditation. For those of you who practice yoga or chi gong or meditate daily, you know how refreshing these exercises are. You probably also know how often you get ideas when you're in a meditative state.

Whatever method you use to shift into an open, receptive space, try to do it on a daily basis. Your creativity will flourish, and so will your writing.

THE STUFF THAT DREAMS ARE MADE OF

Everybody dreams. Grown-ups dream, and children dream. Dogs, rats and dolphins dream. Babies dream when they're still in their mother's wombs. And whales, lions and leopards dream, too. Even people who claim they don't have dreams dream.

In a moment of stunning insight just before the turn of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud called dreams "the royal road to the unconscious." Long before Freud, Greeks, Romans and Egyptians conferred a special power and significance to dreams. So did Jacob and Moses.

Throughout history, the tales we spin in our sleep have occupied a place of magic and mystery and power in our waking lives. In spite of the fact that a few neurophysiologists and psychologists believe dreams are no more than random firings of brain activity during sleep—a form of nighttime neuronal calisthenics—contemporary studies indicate that dreams help us learn new things and lay down long-term memories.

Personally, I believe the function of dreams goes beyond this. When I'm working on a book or just thinking about stories, I often awaken in the middle of the night with an insight into a character or a solution to a plot problem. As a consequence, I'm not only willing to regard dreams and their sleep-drenched aftermath as a significant way to access ideas and inspirations percolating beneath the surface of my consciousness, but I welcome their presence into my creative life.

Capturing Dreams and Other Night Visions

The only time to capture a dream is immediately upon awakening. With the few exceptions of horrific nightmares and unusually vivid or recurring dreams, most dreams and nocturnal fancies evaporate within a minute or two of waking up. If we don't write them down immediately, they will be lost to us forever.

In order to glean all the benefits from our natural creative process, there are several ways to take advantage of dreams, night visions and other inspirations of the dark.

- Keep a notebook and pen by your bed. Use them. This practice is essential for any serious writer. If you have a sleeping partner or a roommate who would take unpleasant exception to your turning on the light at four in the morning, invest in a small flashlight.
- Do whatever it takes to write down the idea that comes to you in the middle of the night. Even if you think your idea is so creative and so inspired you couldn't *possibly* forget it, write it down anyway. I can guarantee that if you do not write it down, chances are you'll forget even the most brilliant and memorable idea. More than once I've awakened in the morning with the recollection that I had a fabulous idea in the sleep-drenched dark. But I was too tired to write it down, so I turned over and closed my eyes. *Hasta la vista, baby.*
- If you don't want to wake up enough to turn on the light, the least you can do is jot down the idea on an index card. A few jumbled words scribbled in the dark are better than no words at all.

If you're one of those people who doesn't recall dreams, try this: After you close your eyes at night, remind yourself to remember your dreams. Make a determined, conscious decision not to lose your dreams before they drift into the dark well of your unconscious. The moment you wake up—especially if you awaken suddenly from a dream—reach for your notebook and write it down. You'll be amazed at how your dream recollection improves.

A Journal for Your Journey

Not all writers keep a journal. But if you haven't done it thus far, I suggest you try it. Journals can be an invaluable source of inspiration for those times when you're slogging your way through a creative desert. They're also great reminders of where you have been and how far you've come. Whether you scribble in your journal every morning or make an entry once a week, the act of committing ideas to writing helps you gain insight into your actions and transform inspirations into reality.

I know a woman who created an entire novel from journal notes she made over a period of a year and a half.

"This was a profound and painful time in my life," she told me. "I thought I'd never forget it. But when I began to write my book, I was amazed at how much I'd forgotten. If it hadn't been for my journal, I would have lost all the small details and critical insights that lent authenticity to my story."

Journals help us capture the intensity of emotions while they're still fresh in our minds and remember details of events before they're eroded by the winds of time. Journals are containers of lists and calendars, thoughts and feelings, reminders and reminiscences. They help us face our demons and confront our ghosts. Journals feed us ideas and jump-start our stories. They show us how to clear the path between consciousness and creativity. And they show us how to light the way between imagination and the written word.

Whatever your original reason for keeping a journal, chances are it will evolve into something more. If you haven't yet tried it, go out and buy yourself a book to write in. Anything will do. When it comes to recording thoughts, a spiral notebook is just as effective as a hand-tooled, leather-bound diary.

Straw Into Gold

Just as Rumpelstiltskin spun straw into gold for the miller's daughter, our challenge as writers is to take the straw we find in our daily lives and weave it into stories that engage the imaginations of children.

I live near the ocean in Venice, California. Not long ago, I took my dog Max to a grassy area by the beach to play with his friend Dodger. It was past ten o'clock at night, and as the dogs romped together on the grass, a huge bird swooped overhead and flew across the bike path to the beach.

"What was *that*?" I asked Dodger's owner, Cliff.

"A gull?"

"Seagulls don't fly at night," I said.

"Pigeons, pelicans and crows don't, either," said Cliff. "And that bird was too large for a bat."

Our eyes followed the bird—visible in the dim light from the street

lamps—as it landed on the post that secured one end of a beach volleyball net.

I walked onto the sand.

The bird didn't move.

I took at few steps closer. The bird stayed on the top of the post.

Astonished, I motioned to Cliff, who walked over and stood next to me.

Perched on the volleyball post as if he were waiting for the game to begin, a horned owl stared straight at us.

Cliff and I stood there for ten minutes looking at our unexpected night visitor. Finally, the owl tired of basking in the glow of our human awe. With a shrug, he spread his wings and flew into the dark toward the lifeguard station.

I don't need to tell you that seeing an owl at the beach is not just unusual, it's outright miraculous. Owls are not beach birds. They're nocturnal creatures that prefer woodlands to ocean. Furthermore, they are not given to hanging around areas where human beings can admire them in the middle of their nightly hunt. That is the only time in my life I have ever seen an owl that wasn't captured on film, stuffed by a taxidermist or trapped between the pages of a book.

Looking for Owls in Our Own Lives

The owl on the beach is an indelible example of the conjunction of the prosaic and the improbable. These two elements do not belong together, which is precisely what makes them memorable.

We all encounter the extraordinary in the ordinary; it happens all the time. But caught up in the demands of our daily lives, we often fail to take the time to see them, to envision them in a story or to open ourselves to the possibility of mystery.

Although I haven't used this owl incident in one of my books yet, it is faithfully recorded in my journal, which I drew on for this book. So there are lots of ways to use ideas—not the least of which is to expand our imaginations and help us remember.

Let's say you want to create a variation on the theme of the owl in a story of your own. You could begin a young adult (YA) novel with the appearance of the owl on the beach—a metaphor for a boy who feels out of place in his own environment. Or you could begin a picture book with the same image and a similar premise. In other unusual pairings,

you could write a story about a girl who has a clam as a pet, or a boy who hand-feeds nectar to a wing-damaged butterfly throughout its month-long life span.

When you write, make it a point to seek out unusual combinations and unexpected relationships. Whether these conjunctions occur in your inner or your outer life, whether they're encountered in a daydream, a car full of kids, or a walk through the produce section at the grocery store, look for those things that fit together even when they don't seem to.

I once wrote a line in a poem that said, "I do not believe in guilt, moderation or dull pencils." These three things have nothing in common except the sensibility of the writer that connected them. That creative leap is the glue that binds unusual elements together—and the glue that can bind your story.

E.B. White's classic *Stuart Little*—the tale of the mouse that lives with a human family—is a brilliant example of combining the ordinary and extraordinary. This isn't a mere mouse that lives behind a hole in the wall and occasionally peeks at Johnny while he's eating breakfast. This is a mouse born and raised in a human family just like any other kid.

D. Manus Pinkwater's *Lizard Music*—a wildly original and comic middle-grade novel in which a lizard quintet plays a prominent role in the story—is another example of the conjunction of the prosaic and the outrageous.

The most popular children's book in decades takes an ordinary English boy named Harry Potter and sends him to wizard school. This particular blend of the commonplace and the fanciful has skyrocketed this series into the stratosphere in every corner of the globe.

Whether you're combining words that have no obvious connection or elements that have no obvious relationship, the important thing is to welcome the outrageous, the fantastical and the unusual into your life. Whether these inventive concoctions occur in a reverie or on a walk in the woods, stay open to the wonder and receptive to the dream. That's when imagination takes the most improbable and memorable creative leaps. And that's where your story begins.

Keeping the Faith

Before we move into how books are structured and written, I want to emphasize up front that there is no right or wrong way to write your book. There is no magic formula, no perfect way to approach your story. But there is the accumulated wisdom of thousands of years of storytelling and the collective experience of writers who have walked this path before you.

Ultimately, the best way to write a story is to find a strategy that works for you. Within this context, it's important to understand that there are lots of approaches to storytelling. I'll discuss many of these ideas in detail in the pages ahead. When you look for a way to tell your story, your most critical goal should be to find a method that fits your temperament, feeds your intellect, and gives you the courage to move forward with confidence and conviction.

Your Turn

Ideas to Get You Started

If you don't already have a journal, get yourself a notebook in which you can record your ideas, thoughts and feelings. Place this journal on your bedside table where you can reach for it first thing in the morning.

Even if writing in the journal feels awkward at first, set a goal of jotting down your thoughts for seven minutes every morning. If seven minutes seems too daunting, do it for three minutes or even two minutes. The object of the exercise is the daily discipline of the doing, not the sense and sensibility of the sentences.

Revving the Creative Engine

If you don't know what to write about, try setting an agenda the night before. Each night before you go to bed, write a topic across the top of a new page in your journal. This is the subject you'll begin to write about the next morning. Consider this topic a jumping-off point, not a classroom essay question. Don't make any rules for yourself beyond the simple act of writing. Forget spelling, grammar and punctuation. You can't flunk journal writing. Set your imagination free and see where it takes you. As they said in the hippie days of yore, "go with the flow."

If you can't think of anything to write about in the beginning, consider some of these topics.

- What was my favorite book when I was a child?
- What was my favorite book when I was a teenager?
- What made my childhood books special to me?
- What's the worst lie I ever told?
- What's the scariest thought I had as a child?
- What's the scariest thing that ever happened to me when I was a child?
- What's the scariest thing that ever happened to me as an adult?
- What was my greatest happiness as a child? Why?
- What was my greatest fear? Why?
- What does loss mean to me today?
- What did loss mean to me as a child?
- Where did my monsters live in the dark? In the closet? Under the bed? Behind the curtains?
- Who were my monsters in the dark?
- If I could control my dreams, what would I choose to dream about?
- What is the scariest dream I've ever had?
- What made me feel most secure as a child?
- What was the best school experience I ever had? What was the worst?
- How would I have reacted if my most secure anchors were removed from me when I was a child?
- What was my favorite age as a child?
- Who was my best friend when I was growing up? What was wonderful about him or her?
- If I could return to my childhood and take one thing with me that I've learned as an adult, what would that nugget of wisdom be and how would it change my life?
- How could I apply that lesson to a children's book?

CHAPTER THREE

From ABC to YA: An Overview

To talk to a child, to fascinate him, is much more difficult than to win an electoral victory. But it is also more rewarding.

—Colette

WHAT AND HOW LONG?

Although opinions vary, there is a general consensus about how long different kinds of children's books should be and what they should contain.

There's always flexibility in the way you approach length and subject matter. However, if you think you want to try something different—if you want to write a one hundred-page picture book or a sixty-page YA novel—it's best to understand the parameters of the genre before you stray too far afield. Once you get a grasp on the logic behind the structure of established book formats, it might make more sense to follow the rules than to break them.

This chapter provides an overview of the different categories in children's literature, beginning with first books—ages one and up—and ending with YA books—ages twelve and up.

A CHILD'S FIRST BOOKS

Jim Trelease, the noted expert on the benefits of reading aloud to children, says that a child's first books should "provide joy." Books accomplish this by lending context and meaning to the things children see and experience.

First books come in all sizes, shapes and colors, and are an entity unto themselves. Since the following chapters of this book generally deal with books for older kids, I'll go into a bit more detail about first books in this chapter.

In these early books, there can be one word on the page or thirty words on a page. What matters is the young child's connection to the content of the book.

When my son was fourteen months old, he loved to cuddle on my lap with Richard Scarry's *Best Word Book Ever* spread out in front of him. He could sit for hours pointing to pictures on the page. Toothbrush, cup, ball. Cherry picker, pumper truck, hook and ladder. What joy he took in naming the objects he saw and finding the picture story on the page! And what pride he took in mastering his world through words.

First books are memorable because of the feelings they evoke in a child. These books pique interest and invite laughter. They engage minds, engender pride and encourage curiosity. Something as elaborate as a pop-up book or as simple as a piece of fuzzy fabric pasted on a picture of a kitten can capture a child's attention and imprint itself in memory for the rest of his life.

Although first books are generally simple, there are several qualities that elevate the best of them to classics, including the fact that the most notable books deal with universal themes. Loss, fear, love, anxiety, anger, loneliness, joy, curiosity, greed, humor. All the things that make us laugh and cry—the things that mark us as human. The more of these attributes you use in one book, the more effective that book will be.

Nine Ways to Enliven a Child's First Book

1) Present an Intriguing Situation. In *Hey, Kid!* by Rita Golden Gelman, a big kid convinces the hero to accept a large box with a mysterious surprise inside. The surprise is a charming monster who creates unwitting havoc in everyone's life. At the end of the book, the hero—exhausted from coping with the antics of the well-meaning but trouble-making monster—pawns off the mystery box on another unsuspecting child. The story comes full circle and is as amusing as it is creative.

2) Challenge the Imagination. In *Possum Come a-Knockin'* by Nancy Van

Laan, the story starts innocently enough with a possum knocking on a door. This single act triggers a series of raucous events inside the house, with each response from an additional family member becoming more outrageous than the last. As in:

Then . . . Baby came a-crawlin'
and dawg started howlin' . . .
as Ma followed Pa to the door.

Needless to say, the naughty possum enjoys every moment of chaos his presence creates.

*3) **Embrace Humor.*** In *Slugs* by David Greenberg, the story begins with all the things you can do with slugs—everything from serving them for breakfast to launching them in rockets to sucking them through straws. The story ends with the revenge of the slugs—how they will come to you in the middle of the night and chop you into pancakes, butter you with germs or turn you inside out. Once again, bringing the story full circle creates the preposterous and satisfying humor in the book.

*4) **Play With Interesting Words.*** In Jack Prelutsky's *It's Raining Pigs and Noodles*, the author takes an obvious delight in playing with words, as in his short poem "The Otter and the Ocelot."

The otter and the ocelot,
As fortunate as they could be,
Now sail the seas upon their yacht—
They won the OCELOTTERY.

*5) **Use Repetitive Language.*** In *Sid and Sam* by Nola Buck, the author finds ways to repeat words, or variations of those words, in a delightful exercise in early reading.

"Sid," Sam said. "That song is so long." "So long?" said Sid. "So long," Sam said. "So long, Sid."

*6) **Invite Participation.*** In *A Puppy to Love* by Muff Singer, the book is designed so you pull a cuddly puppy out of the spine of the book.

The author asks the reader to show the dog how to do several activities, such as run fast, eat ice cream and play hide and seek. At the end of the book, the reader is invited to give the puppy a big hug and tuck him into bed. This is a perfect participatory experience for a small child.

*7) **Offer Visual Clues.*** In *Bookstore Cat* by Cindy Wheeler, Mulligan the cat spies a pigeon, and when he goes after it, he creates havoc. Every step of the story has an illustration that prompts the reader to continue offering visual clues to the words on the page. This blending of words and pictures is an ideal way to help a child learn to read.

*8) **Use Rhythm and Cadence.*** Sometimes this involves rhyme. Sometimes it doesn't.

In *Rain*, Manya Stojic uses a comforting, repetitive cadence to convey her gentle message.

The rain is coming! . . .
The porcupine smelled it. The zebras saw it. The baboons heard it.

*9) **Explore Universal Themes.*** Margaret Wise Brown's *The Runaway Bunny* is ostensibly a story about a little bunny who wants to explore new things. But it's also a story about separation and anxiety and the universal longing for security in the midst of a challenging world. These deeper themes elevate the story from the particular to the universal, making this book an enduring classic.

Whatever you decide to write about, however you decide to approach your subject, write your first books with these attributes in mind.

Don't be afraid to dig deep when writing books for this young age group. Stories for young children should present themes that create magic and mystery, that elevate a common experience into the realm of memorable. These are the elements that make the difference between an ordinary and an extraordinary reading experience for a child—the themes that illuminate a classic.

Picture Books, Ages Three–Six and Four–Eight

Most picture books are twenty-four or thirty-two pages long. Some, however, are forty-eight pages long and written for older readers. The best picture books, such as *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown, address universal themes and appeal to adults as well as children.

On the surface, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter is about naughty rabbits eating carrots in Mr. McGregor's garden. But as Eden Ross Lipson notes in her *New York Times* article, "Children generally grasp the fact that Beatrix Potter was writing about life and death."

My all-time personal favorite is Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, a picture book so brilliant and so deceptively simple that of all the books written for children, I wish I could have written that one. This book presents an intriguing situation, challenges the imagination and embraces humor. It uses rhythm and cadence and repetition. It also invites participation and explores universal themes.

Although *Where the Wild Things Are* addresses the consequences of being naughty, it also digs deeper into a child's psyche. In acting out, Max, the hero, is forced to look at and deal with his anger, personified as monsters in the story. He not only confronts his monsters, he learns to tame them within the behavioral boundaries his mother has set—a critical life lesson for any child. Eventually Max comes to understand that his mother still loves him, even when he misbehaves.

Picture Story Books, Ages Three–Seven. Most picture story books are twenty-four to forty-eight pages long. The youngest books tell a simple story, one that often deals with how something works or how a problem is solved. Since picture story books are told in relatively few words, the plots are necessarily simple. The hero has a problem, confronts complications and discovers a solution.

In *What's Under My Bed?* James Stevenson's young heroes spend the night at their grandparents' house, where they hear a scary story before bedtime. This evokes all the monsters of the dark. When the kids tell their grandfather the next morning, the grandfather tells the children about *his* monsters, thus allaying the children's fears.

Easy Readers, Ages Seven–Nine

Most easy readers are 1,000 to 1,500 words long, or thirty-two to sixty-four pages. Some easy readers have chapters, and some don't. The subject of most of them is lighthearted, although a few deal with more serious issues. Easy readers are written for three different reading levels.

1) Preschool Through First Grade. These books have simple concepts and lots of repetition. They use large type with few words on a page. They also use visual clues to help the child figure out what a word might mean.

In *Toad on the Road* by Susan Schade and Jon Buller, the authors begin with, "I love to drive! I am a Toad. Here I come—Toad on the road!" As the Toad drives through town, he meets a cat, stops for lunch and gives a pig a ride in his car. By the end of the book, the car is jammed inside and out, and the reader has learned new words through repetition and rhyme.

2) First Through Third Grade. These books for the developing reader have slightly smaller type than the first level. The stories are more complex, but the sentences are short and simple, and the word choices are limited.

In *Eek! Stories to Make You Shriek,* Jane O'Connor offers three stories in one simple book. The shortness of the adventures and the creativity of the plot twists help children build confidence in their reading skills.

In O'Connor's story called "Halloween," Ted goes to a Halloween party and meets a strange monster he assumes is his friend Danny. Later, Ted learns that Danny was at home and sick in bed; he never went to the party. This leaves the hero wondering who that strange furry monster really was.

3) Second Through Third Grade. These books have more complicated plots and more complex sentences. The vocabulary is also more advanced. Still, they are simple stories.

In *Just a Few Words, Mr. Lincoln,* Jean Fritz tells the story of how Abraham Lincoln came to write the Gettysburg Address and how the President thought the speech was a failure after he delivered it. As it turns out, of course, the Gettysburg Address has become one of the most famous speeches in history.

Chapter Books, Ages Seven–Ten

Most chapter books are 1,500 to 15,000 words long or forty to eighty pages. These books, divided into eight to ten short chapters, are written for kids who can read and who can handle reasonably complicated plots

and simple subplots. Chapter books occupy a special place in kids' hearts. This is the first time they are reading something that resembles a grown-up book.

Written with lots of dialogue, the vocabulary in chapter books is challenging, and words can often be understood by the context of the sentence. Most chapters are self-contained with a beginning, middle and end. But some chapters move the plot forward by means of cliffhanger endings.

In Patricia Reilly Giff's *The Secret at the Polk Street School*, the kids in Mr. Rooney's class want to win the banner for the class that makes the greatest contribution to the school. Dawn goes in search of a mystery and finds one when she assumes the role of the wolf in the class play. Told in ten chapters, the story captures the fun of childhood along with the complications and challenges of elementary school life.

Middle-Grade Novels, Ages Nine–Twelve

Most middle-grade novels are 15,000 to 35,000 words long or 64 to 150 pages. These books have a wide vocabulary. They have a plot and a subplot and are often comic, but can also deal with serious subjects. The chapters usually have cliffhanger endings and the emphasis in most of these books is on character.

In *Fourth Grade Rats*, Jerry Spinelli tells the story of Suds, a boy who used to be a good kid. But in fourth grade, his friend Joey teaches him, it's important to be a rat—the next step to being a man. In his efforts to fit in and be tough, Suds learns a hard lesson about the consequences of his actions and the choices he makes.

Young Adult (YA) Novels, Ages Twelve and Up

Most YA novels are over 30,000 words long or 120-250 pages. Although younger YA novels can deal with intense and serious subjects, they are often mysteries and thrillers—stories engrossing enough to appeal to younger kids as well as older ones. The older YAs deal with more complex subjects.

What distinguishes a young adult novel from an adult novel is often nothing more than subject matter. These books are complicated, sophisticated and challenging. They are not limited in what issues can be discussed, nor are they in any way "kids' books." By this age level, there

is a high tolerance for ambivalence in both character and plot, as well as a general acceptance of complex and painful subjects.

In *Give a Boy a Gun*, author Todd Strasser deals with the tragic aftermath of the chaos created when two boys use semiautomatic weapons and homemade bombs to storm a school dance. The story is told from multiple points of view, presenting insights and opinions from both students and administrators about everything from gun control to bullying to peer pressure.

In *Dancing on the Edge*, Han Nolan takes on the subject of how our pasts color our present lives. In a complex and demanding, funny and tragic story, Miracle McCloy is constantly reminded that she was born by being rescued from the womb of her dead mother. A series of incidents in her life causes Miracle to examine the reality in which she lives. Shocked by the loss of her sense of self, she eventually ends up in a psychiatric hospital where she must learn to trust her feelings as well as the intentions of the people who love her. This is a good example of a demanding subject treated in a sophisticated way.

To Be or Not to Be Literary

Occasionally beginning writers ask about what kind of book they should write. Should they write a commercial book geared to the mass market—those thrillers and adventures such as the Goosebumps and Finnegan Zwake series that kids consume like popcorn? Or should they aim for a more literary market, with books such as *The Giver*, *A Wrinkle in Time* and *Where the Red Fern Grows*?

My advice about the commercial vs. literary debate is short and simple: Don't worry about it. Produce the best story you can. Write it, craft it, rewrite it, hone it, edit it and love it. When you're finished, the publisher will decide what kind of book it is.

PART TWO

Foundation & Structure

CHAPTER FOUR

Structural Design

Structure is nothing more than a way of looking at your story material so that it's organized in a way that's both logical and dramatic.

—*Jack M. Bickham*, Scene & Structure

FUNDAMENTAL STRUCTURE

Structure isn't a prefabricated box you cram your story into. It is a flexible framework that helps you move through your narrative without losing your way.

Think of structure as a series of road signs posted along the journey of your story. Think also of structure as the rails that keep you from straying onto the meandering paths that can so often lure a writer from the true course of a story.

Structure creates the underpinning of a book. Without it, narrative has no form and plot has no provocative way to move the reader from one moment to the next or from one scene to the next.

The most basic element of structure is what we were all taught in school: beginning, middle and end. If there is a fixed star in the universe of storytelling, this is it. Every story has a beginning, middle and end. Every scene has a beginning, middle and end. But how these elements are dramatized—how they are conceived and shaped, juxtaposed and presented to a reader—is up to you.

Just because storytelling has rules, this does not mean your creativity will be crammed into a premeasured, preset box. What this does mean is that a basic understanding of structure frees you to do your job as a creative writer. Think of Picasso and that bowl of grapes from chapter one.

As I said earlier, there is no one perfect way to fit the puzzle pieces of a story together in order to create a viable dramatic whole. Approach the structuring of a story in a way that feels comfortable for you. Attainment of this goal doesn't happen overnight. Creating one single story often requires experimenting and planning and falling on your literary rear more than once before you find the way that works for your particular tale. The most important issue is to keep on trying until you get it right.

Eight Approaches to Structuring Your Story

1) Keep It Simple. The most fundamental way to look at story is to think of your book as a narrative with a beginning, middle and end. Formulate what each of these means to the plot and how they relate to each other. Then write your story.

- In the beginning, define what your hero wants and why he wants it.
- In the middle, create obstacles the hero must overcome in order to accomplish his goal.
- In the end, resolve the situation in a believable and logical way.

Once you've settled on these fundamentals in your own mind, you can build a story around them, expanding each section and enlarging each plot point.

Beginning, middle and end: the mind, heart and soul of story.

2) Play It As It Lays. Make a few notes about your characters and scenes. Get a firm concept in your head of what your book is about. Take a deep breath and begin.

Here, you are winging it, allowing one situation to lead to the next that leads to the next. There's not much advance planning, but there is room for spontaneity.

For most authors, even seasoned ones, this is a risky way to write a book. This open-ended approach makes it too easy to stray from a well-plotted story path. That said, there's no question this method works for some people. Playing it as it lays is analogous to walking down a dark and unfamiliar tunnel using only a tiny flashlight. You can't see very far in front of you, but if you focus carefully on the business at hand, it's possible to make it all the way to the end of the journey without stumbling.

With this approach, you begin by setting your hero in the opening situation and presenting the opening complication. Then you let your characters do the talking and your imagination do the walking.

- "*Watch*" what your characters do, staying open to the latent meaning of their actions.
- "*Listen*" to what your characters have to say, taking advantage of the implications of their dialogue on the page and their whispers in your ear.

When you approach a story in this evolutionary fashion, your ability to access your unconscious and to honor your imagination plays a major role in the creative process.

3) Take Baby Steps. If dealing with the challenges of plot daunts you, break your story into manageable segments that remove the intimidation from the task. Establish the primary story elements of beginning, middle and end. Then envision your narrative as an ongoing, interconnected chain of scene and sequel. One action causes a reaction that causes another action and reaction. Step by step, scene by sequel, you construct one sequence after another, shaping a story—from simple to complex—with these basic building blocks of plot.

For instance, you open with a scene. Then you ask yourself the following questions.

- What is the logical sequel to this scene?
- What action does this scene trigger that leads to the next scene?
- How have I planted the hook to pull the reader into the next scene?
- What has my hero done to move the story along?
- What is the next logical step in the story?
- How does this scene contribute to the larger context of the book?

Using this step-by-step method, you move through your story from the beginning through the middle to the end.

4) Create a Literary Outline. Many of us were taught how to outline written assignments in school, starting with Roman numerals, then

moving on to A. B. C., 1. 2. 3., a. b. c. and so forth. You can break down the plot of a book in the same way. Once you've blocked out the story, you can follow the clearly marked trail you've set for yourself from one chapter to the next, from beginning to end.

I hasten to add, however, that while you should think of your outline as an organic whole, you should not think of it as a fixed entity. Don't be afraid to make changes when necessary or to explore a new possibility when characters lead you down a different path.

Before you write your book, break down each chapter into outline form, noting which characters and situations are involved in each chapter. The outline will provide a map to follow and give you an overview of the book. Remember, however, that some of the most interesting journeys involve detours and unexpected sights. So even as you follow the map, stay open to the possibility of surprise.

5) Walk the North Forty. Develop a detailed chapter-by-chapter breakdown of your book, creating a visual map to follow. Once you get a grasp on the overview, you can get a better picture of what is happening in your story. When you see those places where you've dropped a plot stitch or where one character hasn't appeared in a while, you can pick up the thread before you move on.

In my first novel, I started writing without a plan. But it soon became evident that I needed a structural guide for my loosely conceived story. With the help of my friend Terry Baker, I eventually created a running chart of my book on shelf paper. A lengthy visual aid, to say the least. I divided the paper into chapter sections with a vertical line. I did the same thing for characters, plot and subplots in horizontal lines that ran through the chapters. Then I wrote down the recurring appearances of various characters in different colored inks. One character was blue. One was red. Another was green. I did the same thing for the plotlines, making notes here and there as reminders that I shouldn't forget to include these things in the book.

When I finally rolled out the diagram across my living room floor and took a look, my entire novel was laid out before me in 12 feet of living color. (Yep, that's right—12 feet!)

To get a sense of what was happening in the book, I strolled the length of my outline like a rancher checking the fence on his north forty. I looked for plot and character omissions. I examined my overlaps and

excesses, most of which were immediately apparent after inspecting the chart. If there were no red or green or blue notations for two chapters, I could see that I had to remind the reader about this character or pick up the thread of that subplot. If the plot was dominated by one color, I re-examined the balance I created between characters.

Rather than a four hundred-page novel, I could just as easily apply this system to *The World's Greatest Toe Show*—my sixty-four-page chapter book.

As you can see from the chart on pages 32-33, this strategy can apply to both fiction and nonfiction, short books and long ones. I have used variations on this approach for several of my more complicated children's novels. And each time I do it I gain comfort and confidence from the concrete visualization the chart provides.

6) Decorate Your Wall. Make scene-by-scene notes on 3"x5" cards and arrange them on a bulletin board. The advantage of this method is that you can move your cards around, add some and toss others, without messing up your overall story.

If a bulletin board is too confining, choose a door or a blank wall. Then use Post-it Notes to define characters and create scenes. Not only do these notes now come in different colors, they also come in different sizes.

Color coding characters and plot themes is helpful when you use these methods because you can see what character or theme or plot point is missing.

7) Go Classical. Honor the old ways and follow classical story structure of Greek drama from the exciting force to the climax to the resolution. I'll cover this method in detail in chapters five and nine.

8) Mix and Match. Do your own thing. Consider all the different ways to structure your story and choose the methods you prefer. If you want to mix scene and sequel with a literary map, do it. Find the combination that's right for you.

Keep in mind that none of these approaches are carved in stone. There are lots of options, and you are not obligated to follow any of them. As I said before, the best way to structure your story is to do what works

CHARTING YOUR BOOK BY CHAPTERS

	Action	Main Characters Emily, Spike, Tulu, Billy, Frankie
Chapter 1	Discuss fair Emily's revelation	Talk about the school fair
Chapter 2	See toe Plan toe show	Look at toe Make plans
Chapter 3	School: Curiosity Home: Planning	Preparation for the fair
Chapter 4	Fair Decorate booth	Keep parents and teachers away from booth
Chapter 5	Fair Shock and horror	Kids show off toe
Chapter 6	Fair Chaos Award	Teachers and principal confront kids And the winners are: The Canal Street Gang ties with Bunny and Violetta
Chapter 7	Club meeting Toe disposal Serious discussion	Discuss what should be done with the toe
Chapter 8	Funeral for the toe	Eulogy for the toe Cremation of the toe

CHARTING YOUR BOOK BY CHAPTERS

	POV Characters Emily	Subplot Bunny and Violetta
Chapter 1	Emily's revelation	Canal Street Gang discuss rivalry, but Bunny and Violetta aren't seen
Chapter 2	Emily shows toe	Bunny and Violetta mentioned by Canal Street Gang
Chapter 3	Emily meets Bunny and Violetta	
Chapter 4	Emily avoids teacher's questions about toe	Bunny and Violetta make fun of Canal Street booth Bunny and Violetta are curious about the toe show
Chapter 5	Emily lures Bunny into booth	Bunny sees toe and is horrified She screams, spills the toe on the ground Chaos!
Chapter 6	Emily confesses to her father that she has his toe	Teachers and Mr. Anderson confront Canal Street Gang Bunny and Violetta are left sulking
Chapter 7	Emily meets with gang to discuss what will happen to toe	
Chapter 8	Emily hides ashes of the toe to save for next school fair	

for you. Whatever method you choose, however, the most important thing to remember is to trust in your story, honor the fundamental conventions of plot and structure, and promise yourself to finish what you set out to do.

Your Turn

Design Your Own Structure

OK, now you try it. Take the story you're working on and ask yourself the following question: Am I a fly-by-the-seat-of-my-pants kind of person or a take-control-and-eliminate-surprises kind of person?

If you're a fly-by-the-seat-of-my-pants person, organize your book according to the suggestions in numbers one through three on pages 28–29.

If you're a take-control person, organize your book using the suggestions in numbers four through seven on pages 29–31.

If more than one approach appeals to you, try number eight on page 31.

This is the time to experiment with different methods. If one doesn't seem like a good fit, try another. As you work, ask yourself the following questions.

- Which method gives me the most confidence in writing my story?
- Which method makes me feel the most comfortable?
- Which method allows me to move from beginning to end with the most ease?
- Which method offers me the greatest chance of finishing my book?

Don't be afraid to commit to a method and start writing your book. But if you get stuck, don't be afraid to make a change. This is the time to try out several different ways to structure your story until you find one that suits your temperament, gives you courage and fuels your creativity.

Chapter Five

Breaking Ground: How to Begin the Beginning

My way is to begin at the beginning.

—*Lord Byron,* Don Juan

One, Two, Three—Go!

A practical fact: If you don't capture an editor's interest at the beginning of a book, it's unlikely you will have that editor's attention for the rest of the book. At the most, you've got two or three pages to hook the reader. That is a writer's reality, especially a first-time writer's reality. With rare exceptions, if you don't accomplish story-telling magic immediately, your manuscript will be tossed onto the publisher's paper mountain commonly referred to as—*dum-de-dum-dum*—The Rejection Pile. Then, if you've included a self-addressed stamped envelope, your manuscript will eventually be returned along with a polite form letter from the editor saying the story that you've slaved over for the past eight months isn't right for their list or doesn't fit the publisher's needs at this time.

It won't matter that pages 10 to 160 of your middle-grade novel are some of the most awesome and compelling ever written in the annals of children's literature. Chances are those pages won't be read as long as they are preceded by a weak beginning.