

HARNESS YOUR INNER-CHILD WONDER TO WRITE FOR KIDS

The Storytellers Summit



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KNOW YOUR KIDLIT AUDIENCES:

Middle grade Audience: Ages 8 to 12

Word Count: Average length is 35,000 but can go to 70,000 (fantasy, sci-fi, upper-MG)

Min. count would be 15,000 for lower-MG (anything shorter and it's a chapter book.)

Kids read up. If your reader is 9 or 10 they will be reading about a 12-year-old character.

Tips: Don't have age splits in MG for main characters. Have young characters close in age.

Young Adult Audience: Ages 13 to 17. YA Word Count: Min. 45,000. Max 90,000 (fantasy, sci-fi)

Younger Kid lit: Picture Books (Ages 3-8, 1000 words or less) Early Reader Books (Ages 5-8, 500-700 words) Chapter Books (Ages 7-9, 4000-10,000 words)

HOW KIDS READ COMPARED TO GROWNUPS:

Kids devour books. Kids read to make strong, lasting bonds with characters and stories.

Books can help kids relate to their life, can inspire kids to be a better friend or accept themselves, and can stay with them forever.

FINDING AN IDEA:

Every story has been done – boy meets girl, a stranger comes to town, a hero goes on a journey. Put your own spin on it. Make it a BIG idea with a BIG question to explore.

Think universal theme: loss, grief, abandonment, betrayal, yearning, love, longing, belonging.

Mythic story structure/archetypes can also help shape your character's journey.

Series are popular because kids love to follow their characters.

THE MIND OF AN MG READER:

- 8- to 12-year-old readers live in a world of contrasts:
- Want to be loyal to their family but crave independence
- Want to define themselves with their own identity but want to fit in
- Yearn to grow up and make choices but want to feel safe & have things decided for them
- Focus on themselves
- Friendships start to get complicated
- Things that they thought about themselves, friends or family starts to change
- Many milestone moments

Tip: With gatekeepers like parents and educators, watch for edgy content in MG such as swearing, sex, drugs, alcohol, violence, etc. If you have romance, it can be a crush and a sweet kiss.



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WAYS TO ENGAGE YOUNG READERS:

Kid lit readers want to get deep into the mind of their characters.

Jumping right into the story (In Media Res).

Show more than tell means your reader feels more of an active participant in the story.

Tip: Don't need to record every detail of your kid character's day but record what emotional event or issue they are going through.

HOW TO THRILL KIDS:

One way to engage kids is to thrill them: suspense, big actions by their characters, or adventure. 10-steps to thrill kids:

1. Put the kids in charge (adults can be side characters).
2. Have the kids figure out how to be their own hero.
3. Whatever scary situations they find themselves in—they must navigate their way out.
4. Don't dwell on the dark stuff.
5. Give them friends in their travels.
6. Have kids discover their own strength to overcome bad things.
7. Make all seem lost! End the chapters on cliffhangers to encourage turning the pages.
8. Have it work out in the end, even if all seems doomed for a while.
9. Add humor! 😊
10. Make it a series. Have a final resolution but leave it open for more adventures.

SETTING & IMAGERY:

- Pick an image system and build on it. Watch for overuse of multiple modifiers. Select which images are important to the scene, character development, and plot.
- Where to use imagery? Look at scenes with character details, setting, action, internal thought, and turning points.
- Use all 5 senses to help your readers visualize your story.
- Show how your character can view the setting differently after a major turning point.

CHARACTERS:

Watch out for character clichés when writing for pre-teens and teens.

Free write about them in their voice. What do they desire, fear, have anxiety about?

Think about how your character could change over the course of your story. The "before" and "after" moments in your character's lives.

19 WAYS TO HARNESS YOUR INNER-CHILD WONDER:

1. Re-visit pictures of yourself as a kid with specific memories. What were you excited about? What did you most desire? What made you sad?
2. Re-read diaries you wrote as a child or teen.
3. Access kids in your family and sit with them and make up a story.



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4. View a child's perspective. Make a snow angel. Hide in a closet. Climb a tree.
5. Have a kid in your target audience read your manuscript and point out what elements don't ring true to them.
6. Create a new bucket list with kids in your family. What do they dream of doing that you could do together?
7. Do any kids you know write stories? Read them to grasp their worldview.
8. Ask young people you know to describe an event that happened to them. Take note of how they create a verbal story.
9. Go back to childhood memories and draw a map of your neighborhood. Walk through it in your mind and journal about it. What do you see? How do you feel?
10. Do a stand-up dramatic read-aloud of a scene in your story.
11. Face a childhood fear.
12. Engage in child's play with your kids.
13. Eavesdrop on kids at the mall or park. Take notes of their conversation.
14. Look back at the books you loved as a child. What are your favorites and why?
15. Interview real people who've gone through the same situations as your kid characters.
16. Write your kid self a letter. What would you tell yourself about life? What advice would you give to help yourself out back then?
17. Look back and write a day in your life as a tween or teen. What was a typical day? What did you feel, experience, or learn?
18. Visit those places you spent time at as a child. Walk in your childhood shoes again.
19. List your favorite PB/MG/YA books from your childhood or current time. Write down why these stories and characters appeal to you.

ABOUT DONNA:

Donna Galanti is an award-winning author of middle-grade books with the *Unicorn Island* series, *Joshua and the Lightning Road* series, *Loon Cove Summer*, and *The Secret Winners Club* (3/3/26). She's also the author of the paranormal suspense *Element Trilogy* for adults. Donna has lived in fun locations including England, her family-owned campground in New Hampshire, and in Hawaii where she served as a U.S. Navy photographer for Fleet Intelligence Pacific. Donna is an avid outdoor adventurer and nature lover and volunteers for the Old-Growth Forest Network and the National Audubon Society. For more information on her books, online courses, speaking, and events, visit her at: www.donnagalanti.com



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