

Writing Fiction For Middle Graders, Part Two

In the last article we talked about whether to use an outline when you're starting to think about your newest story for middle graders and the best place to get ideas.

Now let's turn to that all important first chapter and believability.

The first chapter

The most crucial part of a new book for a middle grader is the first chapter. If you don't grab their attention in the first couple paragraphs, you haven't done your job right.

Now, you might say that every first chapter of every book is critical. I agree.

But when you're writing a mystery for a person aged 8-12, you need to knock their socks off on the first page. And it should be as short as possible to convey what you want them to know right off the bat. With fiction aimed at older kids or adults, you can afford to ramble about a bit more and have a longer chapter.

When I write mysteries for kids I have to take them by the shirt and shake them a little bit. This is how the first two paragraphs of *Bitter Tastes* starts:

I can tell you exactly when I became afraid. I'm not talking about the story-by-the-campfire-willies. I mean hair-standing-up-on-the-neck scared. My stomach churned when Martha Cunningham dragged me into this nasty doublewide trailer. And then I saw it.

The murder weapon.

One of the things I wanted to make sure happened was that kids knew instantly where my characters were and what they were looking at. I wanted my audience to be looking through the eyes of my hero, Kathy Harmon.

I'm also a huge fan of one sentence paragraphs. See that second line? It's a paragraph all by itself. It's a great technique to use when you want to bring the tension up a little bit by breaking up the flow.

They've got to believe

I visit a lot of schools and talk to a lot of kids and I usually ask why they think the Harry Potter series works well. Most of them talk about the story and some of them talk about the characters.

But it doesn't have anything to do with that.

The reason the Harry Potter series works is because it sets in a place kids are familiar with and believe in: school. It doesn't matter if you're taking a class in potions and spells or current events. A school is a school.

It's all about believability.

If you're writing a story that is science fiction or fantasy, you can make up any kind of world you want as long as some of the elements are things kids can relate to. School is one, dealing with parents is another, even having to work out troubles with friends.

Point of view

As adults we can make the distinction between characters who are speaking dialogue and when we get into a character's head. Jumping into someone's head is called point of view.

When you write for kids, it's important to stick to one point of view at a time.

The best way to deal with this is to be in the hero's head only. I usually try to have the hero appear in nearly every chapter but sometimes isn't

possible. SO how do you deal with this "one POV pony?"

When you catch yourself writing that a character thought something or wondered something – and that character isn't your hero – you need to convey those thoughts differently, like in dialogue.

Here's a quick example: my hero, Kathy, has a best friend named Martha. If I wanted to write a line in Martha's head, I'd write ...

I knew she shouldn't do that, Martha thought.

The way to correct this to stay only in Kathy's POV could be done like this ...

"You shouldn't do that, Kathy," Martha said.

Conclusion

Writing for middle graders is challenging but once you master some simple techniques, you'll find it to be some of the most rewarding writing you'll ever do. Keep a notebook of ideas, read lots of kids' fiction and start small with a short story.

If that story seems to have more life to it, consider turning it into a novel!

About the Author

Victoria Rosendahl has published one adult mystery and has begun the Kathy & Martha Mystery Series with the first installment, Bitter Tastes. Check out [Bitter Tastes](#) for ideas on how to build a kid friendly web site and feel free to e-mail her at info@vbrosendahl.com.

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