

10 tips for Illustrating Children's Books - By Julie Olson

The following list is in no particular order, just things to think about, incorporate and consider when you are illustrating a picture book.

1. Draw Kids...babies, toddlers, preschoolers, k-5: Even if you are someone who illustrates with animals rather than people, drawing children is a great way to then mimic childlike actions, behaviors, and positions in whatever characters you draw. This will in turn, help children identify with your characters better. If you don't have kids of your own to observe and sketch from, go to a playground and spend the afternoon sketching (just try not to look too creepy doing it...bring along one of your published books or pocket portfolio to verify your purpose being there, just in case).

2. Draw objects and background scenes. The most enjoyable part of a drawing for me comes through the main characters. The "hard part" is the background. However, to get a job illustrating picture books, you can't just be good at drawing characters. You almost have to become a landscape painter, an interior designer, an architect, and a set designer all at once. Whew! Who knew being a children's book illustrator was so tough. So, draw and PAINT plenty of THINGS. Draw when you are outside, sketch when you are in the city, paint pictures of interior spaces. Soak it all in!

3. Hone your 2D design skills. Take a 2 Dimensional Design class online or one offered nearby. Design doesn't hone your drawing skills, but to be a good artist/illustrator (especially where books are concerned), you **MUST** be a good designer. Practice designing compositions with a few basic shapes. I once had to design 100 different compositions using only varying sizes of black circles. After that, I was so grateful and more aware of the varying basic shapes there are to use in compositions. Design itself tells a story. It reflects action, mood, and tone. A simple site like this may offer some online assignments you can do from home.

4. Think about Color. Artists like Maxfield Parrish understood color enough to manipulate it's characteristics. I recommend a simple site like this if you are just beginning <http://thevirtualinstructor.com/Color.html> or a book. I used Itten's The Elements of Color in college, and I still have it to browse through now and then. However, a hard copy is quite pricey now. For the most part, I would play and experiment with color. Color and value sets mood, tone, voice, and place in every picture book...even if it's black and white. And remember, color won't help if the design is bad.

5. Design your characters. Every main, supporting and background character in a picture book should be designed. Each character needs to look like an individual. Just like every person or animal on earth is unique, so should be your characters. You especially need to know your main characters enough to be able to draw them in any position, mood, or situation and still appear recognizable as THAT specific character.

6. Utilize every page to tell your story by understanding the picture book format. Look at tons of picture books. There are a few rule breakers, but essentially, a picture book must have a page count that is divisible by 8. Most books are 32 pages. I provide a layout map [HERE](#). The front matter can vary slightly, but the text begins on page 4 or 5 and ends on a single page (32) at the end. An understanding of this format will allow you to utilize all the pages you can to tell the story.

7. Design your entire book. After you understand the layout of the book, make sure what you put in it is planned out completely. Draw Thumbnails for each page (many many many different ones). You can print out Thumbnail Sheets [Here](#) and [Here](#). Remember most books are about 9x10 or 8.5x11, vertical. It costs the publishers more to do horizontal, or square, etc. So if your book needs to be another format, find out from the publisher what they agree to. When you are done drawing thumbnails, choose the scenes you like best and put them together in order. Make sure your book flows from front to back and that designs from page to page are not repetitive or boring. Make the design reflect the text.

8. Use your illustrations to tell more story than exists in the text. Illustrating most picture books allows for the illustrator to insert some small substory or something extra developed only in the pictures. It can be simple or complex. A few examples:

- In *Annie McRae*, I added a little brother to the scenes of the book even though he's never mentioned in the text. He interacts with Annie and is even the only fully displayed character in one scene.
- In *I Heard of Cows*, I added a deck of cards that falls off the nightstand and floats through the rest of the subsequent illustrations.
- In *Already Asleep*, I created a relationship between a cat and a mouse playing through the scenes, culminating with a friendship on the back cover.
- In *The Happiest Mommy Ever*, I used the book design for the substory element. The scenes in the past are designed in scrapbook form, and the present are vignettes.
- In *Tickle Tickle*, I never mention a mouse in the text, yet he is integral to the story's plot. This is a more complex example of telling the story beyond the text.

9. Attend Conferences and Workshops. There exists a vast network of professionals in the industry out there sharing their knowledge...utilize it. The SCBWI (Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators) is GREAT for those newer to the industry and I highly recommend their national conferences. Their local/regional chapters often hold beneficial conferences as well. The yearly Writing and Illustrating for Young Readers is an intensive, AMAZING, week-long conference held near Salt Lake City, Utah. In addition, local one-day conferences, like Writing For Charity, often offer a wealth of knowledge for an inexpensive fee and go to a good cause. Beyond the knowledge you gain, you can also network, join critique groups, and meet agents and editors willing to accept your submissions just because you came to that conference.

10. Use a Blog, Website, Print and Social Media. No one will know you and your art exist unless you show them. These days, that's primarily through the internet. Put your best work out there. You can put a small watermark on your images or just make them small and pixelated enough to be limited to web use only. Twitter and/or facebook can be another avenue to share your work AND become connected with like-minded people who encourage your talents. In addition, you can create and print postcard mailers to mail to publishers as promo pieces. They receive tons of these so be creative. Use the mailing list that SCBWI provides to it's members. Make sure you are only mailing to relevant publishers.

Well, that's it. You should be a better illustrator now...well, better informed anyway. Best wishes to you and your book adventures. I hope this was helpful. If so, pass this URL along: <http://jubeellustrations.blogspot.com/2012/02/10-tips-for-illustrating-childrens.html>