

# The Creation of a Picture Book

## By Julie Olson

It's hard to put into one article all it takes to write and illustrate a picture book. But I'm going to give you a "quick" run-down. Now, keep in mind, everyone has their own process and we don't even follow our own process all the time. But I will outline my usual way to go about it.

You may ask, "Why do I need to know this? I'm just a writer," or "What's the point? I'm just an illustrator, not a writer." Well the reason is this, a picture book is about the marriage of the words AND the art. If a writer doesn't understand the process the artist goes through and vice versa, the book is never as good. It takes a mutual respect and understanding of each other to create the best picture books. The writer can't overstep their bounds and use too many descriptive words that bind the illustrator and the illustrator must respect and be true to the words' feel and meaning in his/her art. So even if you aren't an artist, follow these steps and only turn in the writing.

### PHASE ONE

**1. BRAINSTORM:** This can be done in a written word style or by sketching different characters. In this stage, I do both. I try to come up with **fun titles, main ideas, or themes**. I **sketch characters** like kids or animals with distinguishing features or characteristics. In this phase I also focus heavily on coming up with **problems or main obstacles to overcome**. Most picture books have a problem and the whole story is centered on solving it.

By the way, if you are a writer and not an artist, go ahead and do the art parts in all these steps. It will help you understand your book all the better which will make the end result better. And in the end, just submit the words.

From here on out, I'm going to speak in the most common terms regarding picture books. There are always those books out there that "break the rules." But following the rules is a good place to start. Then you can learn how to bend them later.

So get going...brainstorm your ideas today. Come up with one you like. Sketch some fun characters or go through your sketchbook and find one you already like but have no story for. Do this, and **YOU'RE ON YOUR WAY** to creating your own picture book!

**2. GET TO KNOW YOUR CHARACTER:** Once I've settled on a problem and a character, I sketch and sketch that character in various moods and positions. I also try to write down everything I can about that character even if it won't show up in the story at all. I've got to get to know who the character is. So I write down habits, favorite color, favorite food, favorite toy or security item, something they can't live without, personality traits. Everything I can think of.

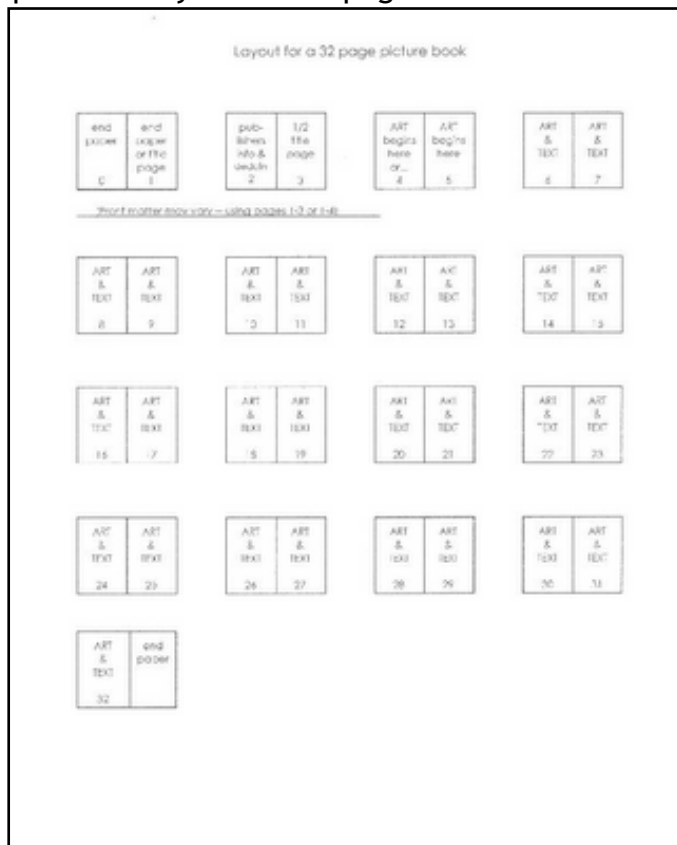


## PHASE TWO

**1. SKETCH AND WRITE:** this is a hard stage to describe if you are doing both the illustrating and writing of a book. Many times I'll sketch out ideas of scenes of the character trying to solve the problem before I've even written words. I'm a visual person as well as a verbal person, so a lot of times, I simply go back and forth between words and sketching. However, in this phase, there is often MORE writing than sketching going on overall. For the standard format picture book, you introduce the character and the problem, you have the character try three times to solve it, and in the end he/she does. The final page should be a punchline of some sort or a line that makes you wonder what will happen next.

**2. WRITE AND REWRITE:** Once I have some main ideas or scenes down, I really begin the writing process. This can be longer and slower for me because I consider myself an artist first and a writer second. But you can't give up. Picture books are some of the hardest books to write. Even though everyone thinks they can write a picture book, they don't realize how hard it is to condense a whole story into 500-750 words. EVERY WORD COUNTS. That's why I say write and rewrite.

**3. CUT AND SLASH** every word that doesn't move the plot forward. Watch out for too much dialogue or not enough action. Show don't tell. The descriptive words aren't usually necessary. When you use them, you confine the illustration. A picture book should need the pictures to tell the rest of the story. The words don't say it all. Keep your word count low. Picture books are for younger and younger kids these days. The story needs to fit onto 32 pages of a book (with the story starting on page 4 or 5) so make sure you have 14 scenes and the punchline page at the end. Break down your words into groupings with an extra line space when you want a page break.



**4. DEVELOP A THICK SKIN:** You'll need it from here on out...when you start showing your work to others in the industry. ;-)

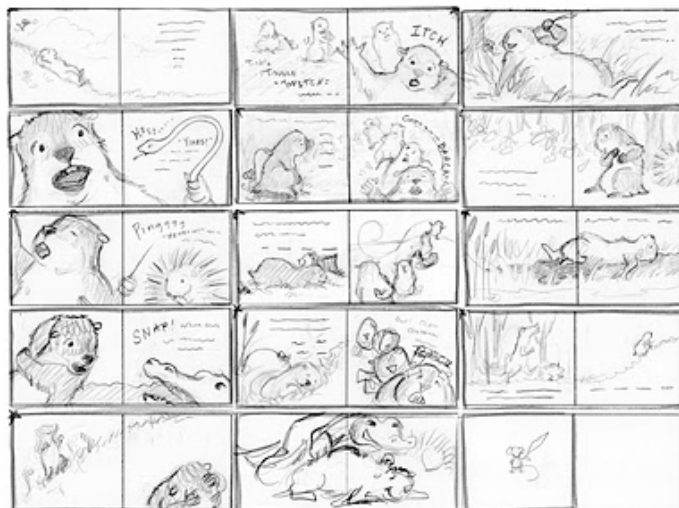
**5. CRITIQUES:** once you've done all you can do for the words and developed a few rough idea sketches of the character and a scene or two, show your story to other writers and illustrators for feedback. Be ready to change things and take the criticism for what it is...it's there to help your story, not hurt your feelings. You don't have to do EVERYTHING everyone suggests. But take them all into consideration and choose what works best for your story. Join a critique group or email those you know in the industry and ask for feedback.

## PHASE THREE:

**1. THUMBNAILS (STORYBOARDING):** After you feel like you've done all you can do for the writing, the real fun begins...the actual illustrating. However, this first stage is the most difficult and thought intensive for me. It's where all the hard work happens in illustrating. All the problems and questions have to be solved in regards to art in this stage. Even though you try, some still may arise later. However, they usually aren't so major if you do your work here.

I begin by sketching tiny scenes (tiny because it takes less time to draw small than draw big) of each page in a rectangle with a line down the middle. This rectangle represents the book opened up. The line down the middle is the center of the book where the pages are stitched together. This is called the gutter. When designing your scene, you don't want to put any important elements in the gutter...they'd get warped and possibly lost as the pages stitch together. You also have to design room for the type. Whether it's going over the illustration or outside of it in the white space, you need to know where you are putting it. I draw many thumbnails for each scene for the entire book. Then I choose the designs I like the best and line them up to make sure I have a good design flow and variation. At this point I could go on and on about design and what goes into that, but I'd bore the artists and confuse the writers. Just know, you can't have every page from the same viewpoint and your design needs to reflect the mood and the style of the scene as well.

Here's an example of the chosen thumbnail images all in order from start to finish for the book I wrote and illustrated called "Tickle Tickle Itch Twitch." Notice the variation in size and layout and resting and action scenes. These all fit on an 8.5 x 11 sheet of paper...that's how small they are. But look at the detail you can cram in.



**2. FULL SIZE SKETCHES:** After I've worked out any design flaws in the thumbnail stage (as many as I notice), I begin drawing each scene full-scale. Some illustrators do a mid-size drawing, however, I put a lot of detail into my thumbnails so I can skip the mid-size stage. It's important you draw these to scale. Note that a standard vertical picture book is about 9 inches wide by 10 inches tall for each single page and a horizontal is just the opposite. A Square book is usually 9x9. So for a double page spread (the book laid open and the illustration filling both sides) the illustration needs to be 18 inches wide for the vertical books and 20 inches wide for the horizontal books. Just know that even after all this, a publisher still has the right to request a different page size. You just draw at your ideal for the story. If you want the picture to fill the whole page, bleeding off the edge, make sure to draw it a quarter inch beyond the border on all sides. At this point it's really fun to see all the work start to come together.

Here is an example of a full size sketch (shrunk to fit the paper of course).



**3. CREATE A DUMMY BOOK:** this is a book in sketch format. I scan in all my sketches to the computer and type in the words on each scene...knowing full well that the designer at the publisher will put it all in place in the end. It's just there to hold space and show there is space for the text...and to read the story along with the sketches. I also mock up a cover, a title page and leave space for a copyright info page and dedication. I do try to start smaller elements of the story or art in illustrations on these pre-story pages. It adds a fun element to the book. I load the pages into a program called "IN DESIGN" by adobe and this makes printing out the pagination and dummy book much easier. (You can do tutorials online for it if needed...but you can also just cut and paste the printouts onto the proper pages in a pre-stapled blank page book). It's hard to describe the actual creation of the dummy book in words, but essentially, think back to your gradeschool days and those little books you used to make with your own stories and illustrations. That's what this is. After I print out the pages I staple them in the middle and have a small sketched out book. (I usually only print it at 1/3-1/4 of the actual size of the book.

These are little examples of dummy books. Only the one with the sketched cover is ready to be sent out. The others are my own working copies, from the VERY rough one on scrap paper and sharpie, to the printed text version where I'll tape in copies of sketches to check flow or use as a half-way point, to the final one with text and sketches.



**4. CRITIQUES:** This time you need critiques especially from other illustrators. You've had writers critique the words, now have illustrators critique your book. Be ready to make changes. ALWAYS be ready to make changes.

## PHASE FOUR:

**1. HAVE A WEBSITE OR BLOG:** Make sure before you begin submissions, you have a professional website or blog the editor can refer to if they want to find out more about you or your work. If you are an artist have your portfolio out there. If you are a writer, have some other samples. Think of it as your online resume. Best foot forward.

You can set up a blog at [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com) or various other sites. You can also download website templates for free online or pay for a more professional looking site from places like [www.bludomain.com](http://www.bludomain.com)

**2. SEND OUT THE DUMMY BOOK:** If you have an agent, great. They will do this for you. However, if you don't, the work is up to you. Find a list of publishers who publish books in the same genre and send it to their head editor and assistant editors. The lists can be gathered through joining the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators ([www.SCBWI.org](http://www.SCBWI.org)) or checking out CBC.org online or by researching in "Writers Market Place" (however that publication is often out of date). When mailing your work, you put a cover letter in the envelope along with a report style printout of just the words (double spaced, 1" margins, start half way down with title and name, put your contact info at top left and the word count top right) and your dummy book. In the cover letter, type it business style,

introduce yourself and any credentials in the first line (publication credits, degree, or experience). Then briefly explain what's enclosed. Tell what the story is about in one sentence. Thank them for their time and close with Sincerely. Include a self-addressed stamped postcard for them to return to you with their comments.

**3. WAIT AND WAIT AND WAIT:** Give the editor at least 3 months to respond. After that, it is fine to call and ask them what they thought of your submission. They are VERY busy people...overworked and underpaid. But they love what they do and want to find good work. Just respect them and their time. If they have feedback for you, that is REALLY positive. Take it and make your work better. If they don't, that means they didn't even like it enough to try to help make it work. That doesn't necessarily mean your book is bad though. It could just mean it's not the book for that editor or publisher. But feel free to ask them specifically what you can do to make it better. Ask them if they ever see it working for their publishing house.

**4. BEGIN AGAIN, WHILE YOU WAIT:** during those months of waiting and possible rejection, get started on another book. Then you won't be obsessed and frustrated with the long process. Just know, most of the time, a picture book takes YEARS to create, to get to a publisher, to get through a publisher, and out on shelves. It's usually at the least a 3 year process (and that's fast).

#### **THE END or THE BEGINNING?**

So after reading all that or DOING all, you have to decide for yourself whether or not this is the thing for you. It's a tough road but it's so exciting too. You won't become rich or necessarily famous by doing picture books...they are probably the least appreciated form of literature out there. But you can gain a great sense of satisfaction and accomplishment from creating wholesome, fun, inspiring products to put out into the world. GOOD LUCK!