

# childwrites

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO WRITING AND ILLUSTRATING A CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOK

*Creating a Children's  
Picture Book is  
Child's Play*



Written by *Emma Mactaggart* Edited by *Ainsley Shepherd*



## **Also by the Authors**

**Emma Mactaggart B.Bus (Mkting)**

### **Picture Books**

I Can Do Anything

Lily Fabourama Glamourama

Imagine If... (expected release date: Nov 2012)

### **Memoirs**

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A Child's View, An Anthology

**Ainsley Shepherd B.Bus/Arts (Mkting, PR, Comm)**

### **Picture Books**

Slow Down Sarah (expected release date: Nov 2012)

# child**writes**

*Creating a Children's Picture Book is Child's Play* 

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Text © Ainsley Shepherd

Illustrations © Emma Mactaggart

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# By Way of **Introduction**

The creative process – regardless of whether the platform is music, literature, dance or visual arts – is an intensely satisfying one, which can be peppered with frustration and limitations!

Creative endeavours are the outpourings of those who are passionate about what they do. For anyone embarking upon the journey of learning within any of these endeavours, there is a plethora of advice proffered by these same passionate practitioners, who are often only one step ahead.

We would love to tell you that the creation of a children's picture book is a quick and easy process. In reality, it is not quick and easy, but it is a process. And it is possible. At the end of the day, the reward you will experience when you hold your published children's picture book in your hands cannot easily be surpassed. This is regardless of your motivation for writing in the first place – whether you are intending to give a gift of words and images in book form (much like the gift of a labour of love, like a quilt), or write the next bestseller in the children's picture book market.

To make the process more manageable, we have intentionally broken it down into clear steps. And we've been incredibly honest and revealed the potential pitfalls, so that you can avoid them. We recommend that you first of all read the whole book through, so that you can get the big picture of the process it entails. Then go back and follow the plan we've laid out, step-by-step.

The methodology in this guide has been tested since 2004 and children between the ages of nine and twelve have been the students. We know it works.

If a child can do it, why can't you?

We're excited to walk step-by-step with you, to help you turn your dream into reality. Enjoy the journey!

Thank you.

*Emma and Ainsley*



# Foreword by Annie O'Dowd

Creativity is sometimes like magic. To make a lovely work of art or construct a perfect sentence can not only be immensely satisfying, but bring the maker a sense of mastery and order. From out of the ordinary, beauty is moulded; from chaos, an exciting set of ideas is brought forth. But the artist does not always control his or her abilities. The process of bringing to birth what lies hidden can be difficult. At times our muse seems to have vanished and we are stranded, unable to express ourselves. Then, suddenly, like a dam breaking, our connection returns, rushes out and we race to keep up with the tumble of ideas that seem to flow effortlessly with perfect clarity. Perhaps this is why creative powers are sometimes viewed with reverence. Harnessing creativity in both ourselves and others is a gift. Teachers can guide us but we too can learn strategies to tap the source and bring forth what is already there in abundance.

Creativity is not only the precinct of the talented or the 'artistic' soul. It is universal. Being alive is creative. Creativity is our birthright. One only has to watch a small child at play to witness this in miniature. Children delight us with their antics as they dress up, take on roles and make up little stories that, like a stream of consciousness, are funny, touching, and often a nonsensical soup of their experiences. Little children use creative play to make sense of their world; to take charge of it. When we are adult, we have a much more complex relationship with our creative selves. In part, we are hampered by knowledge and experience yet it is these very things that feed and give structure to our endeavours.

In this sense, we are all potential artists, writers and actors. Each of us has within us the life force which connects us not only with each other through unseen currents but, even with the sacred. Whether or not you believe in a force greater than yourself, in creating we mimic the divine. Of course we also need skills to make it happen, but in order to tap into that special dimension we need the unnamable... the wisp of smoke that is inspiration. Only in seeking this delicate opening can we find the connection that will transmute our ideas into that ancient and magic currency – stories.

Stories too, are universal; an oral tradition stretching back to our earliest beginnings. Stories existed before written language and perhaps even before any other kind of human culture. They bind us together, teach us, help us to share experience and express who we are. Stories are multi-layered. On the surface they transport us to other places and seize us in the grip of plot and character but underneath, stories hold more subtle layers of meaning, helping us to understand the experience of being human.

Naturally, inspiration is not the only thread in the creative process. Once we have begun work on an idea that 'takes', there is a long struggle before us. Most of what we need to complete our project is made of humbler clay: persistence, perspiration and confidence. Self-belief will buoy you up when your inspiration falters and persistence will push you onwards when you lose faith, but pure hard work is what gets you there in the long run. Somebody once said that nothing worthwhile is easily achieved and this is definitely true of any creative aspiration. But don't let this dampen your spirits, only remember that as you struggle towards perfection, it is normal to feel discouraged many times before you reach your goal.

For children, to be able to create their own books is a richly rewarding experience. It will help them to shape their ideas and build their confidence, and teach them about words, colour, texture and design. The benefit to be gleaned from the arc of the creative process is far reaching for both teacher and student. The beautiful little covers, featured at the end of each chapter, along with the quotes submitted by the children from the Child Writes program, are truly amazing. I found myself wanting to turn the covers and see what they had created. The designs of the covers themselves are so many and varied, it is easy to see the care that has been taken with every choice of colour, illustration and title. For anyone, regardless of age or experience, who has the burning desire to bring their ideas into being, 'Child Writes' is a rich source of encouragement, guidance and simple step-by-step instructions. Emma Mactaggart's enthusiasm for the entire process is apparent from the very first paragraph and her tireless investigation of every possible detail, leaves the budding author inspired!

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# Preface

You have a burning desire to create something or to teach others to create something... I know!  
Otherwise you wouldn't have bought this book.

YOU are exactly the person I wrote this for:

I can just imagine your search for a step-by-step resource guide which takes you through the ENTIRE writing, illustrating and publishing process; beginning with extracting an idea from your head and ending with you reading your words on pages which may even be decorated by your beautiful illustrations. But to reach that point, you knew you needed to understand how to organise the printing, the promotion and indeed, all the other practical jobs and responsibilities which fall to an individual along the exciting and self-fulfilling journey which is creating a children's picture book.

How do my words fit a children's picture book format? How do I plan and design a double spread? How do I contact a library? Who can I contact for assistance? How much time will it take? Will I make any money? Who organises an ISBN? How do I price my book? There can be thousands of questions to ask, each requiring an answer. All of a sudden, the entire process can look too daunting and overwhelming. Sometimes it feels as though it would be easier to just forget it.

I would seriously suggest putting all questions aside for a moment, and trust me as I lead you through the step-by-step process – a journey which you can not only complete, but also enjoy.

Even though you have already purchased this book, I should establish my credentials before you turn another page. After all, I really want you to take everything I give you and RUN WITH IT.

I am an accidental author – at least this is what I tell children as I introduce myself, when I speak to groups at schools. I was a mad keen letter writer when I was younger and I seriously enjoyed it when a recipient would say to me "Ah, your letter made me cry", or "It made me laugh". There is something intrinsically satisfying in affecting people through words. This – combined with a nearly nauseating passion for sharing anything I am interested in – is why I write.

In a past life, I have worked in partnership with a friend in a catering business, traded admin support time in a gallery for art class time and worked innumerable shifts in a hardware store. I have sat in train carriages as a tourism assistant, prepared marketing plans for scaffolders, and worked my way through TAFE and uni (working in bars, selling roses, telemarketing, waitressing, painting, tiling...). Now I am filling my days with even more traditional work – being a mother to three children. I believe the latter job is HARDER than anything associated with a secretarial course, a business degree and parts thereof of a visual arts certificate!

I suspect I am very much like you and have discovered (amidst my eclectic day to day lifestyle) that I have a penchant for writing and for sharing. Having a full and rewarding world is a wonderful point of entry for any writer; with so much to experience to draw upon. It can be a hindrance as well, as you juggle the many responsibilities you already have.

Of course, it is what I have been doing for the past couple of years specifically which will be of interest to you. Back to the 'accidental author' bit... I wrote a lovely list of 'empowering' thoughts for my second daughter in 2003. She loved it! I added more and more words. When she started to lose interest, I drew some pictures – and she was interested again, and so were her friends. I pretended to be a graphic designer and set it up as 'book' and pressed *print* on the photocopier. With a sprinkle of colour, a dash of love and a dose of optimism, I investigated the options of printing it 'properly'. It all seemed manageable – especially when I fiddled with the numbers and realised if I sold so many, I would break even, and if I kept selling more copies I **WOULD BE LOADED!** I drove the printers nuts until they rang and said my first order of 1,000 children's picture books was ready.

Have you any idea, any at all, how much space 1,000 books takes up? We are only talking about twenty-six pages of book, A4 size. It was ridiculous! I nearly blew a tyre on the way home! The boxes were packed in around my children, they filled the boot beyond capacity, and they were extremely heavy... well, the last ones certainly weighed more than the first ones! My kids sat in the doorway of the house as one by one, I lugged the boxes from the car, lined them up in the garage and with a sweaty brow and a 'Right, that job's done!', I turned on my heel and swept them up, and we went inside to continue on with a very normal home day. It was not until the two little ones tried to get back into the car to pick up the first-born beauty from school, that I realised we couldn't even open the doors to the car! So I reversed out, cursing my optimism, and for the first time had a few second thoughts.

Now it was time to be methodical. Slowly and surely, I sold those books, wrote and illustrated another one the next year (2,000 copies!) and did the same. With optimism, I embarked on book number three the following year. One book a year, surely that was not so ambitious? I had a business name, I had purchased a list of ISBNs, I had sold nearly 3,000 copies, and I had plans!

I was interrupted by my gorgeous girls as I dragged out the drawing table. They had held a meeting. I was impressed – they were only seven, five and three!

*"Please Mummy, please don't do another book. It takes you away from us."*

Now, I have listened at seminars, workshops and festivals about incredible women who manage to work successfully for years with children at their feet, producing enough income to keep everyone afloat and who still have close relationships with those children. I didn't have enough faith in myself. After all, I am the type of person who gets so distracted by anything that I will inevitably burn the potatoes. I was already operating at full tote, so to speak, and I had to concede to my children!

So, what do you do? I really wanted to keep going. Short stories, visual diaries, notebooks – all became my companions. Even now around my office as I type, I have pages of writing, half-baked stories, colourful images, thoughts and contemplations. I did win a place in an anthology for a short story. I have helped friends produce their own books. I have a number of children's picture books in various stages surrounding me.

All along, I have had the opportunity to be the grown-up writer. Whilst I was selling my books, I offered and accepted any offer to do 'author' visits to school or talks to librarians, or readings – ANYTHING. And no, I didn't charge any fees. There is something particularly attractive about someone who offers something

for nothing! Each and every time, the introduction would be from someone I knew, like another parent with children at another school who would say, "Oh, will you talk at my school?" and I would say "Yes" to every invitation.

There were two amazing gigs which channelled me in the direction I am still following. The first was being invited by Jill Temple to be a Literacy Hero at Middle Ridge State School. (I was so nervous! I think they felt sorry for me.) Jill is a generous, creative sage, and when she starts a conversation with "I've been thinking you should...", you know to listen! The second was a workshop with librarians at a district seminar. (I spoke, still nervous as anything and making up the workshop as I went. Then, I knew they felt sorry for me!) There I met Jan Watkins. Jan became my 'agent' and had me travelling around the city and the surrounding district for book weeks, year after year, doing author talks, which allowed me to hone my presentation skills.

The following year, I finished the USQ McGregor Summer School's Illustrations Course with Rebecca Berrett. With seventy hours of contact time, we learnt the entire process of illustrating a picture book and exhibited an example of what publishers are looking for in a dummy rough. Now I had written two books and now I knew how to illustrate a book properly, as opposed to illustrating instinctively! If I couldn't work on another book myself, surely I could show others how to do it.

Sometimes, it simply pays to say your thoughts aloud. A conversation with Jill about the plethora of courses which are available to adults, and yet nothing for children. As I write it now, I can't believe how harmless this sounds – doesn't it?

The soon-to-be-named Child Writes workshop started as a six hour journey with a group of children. The goal was to create a character, or a setting, or a plot - to arm the children with at least one of these vital elements – and then shoot through! The thing was, the children became enraptured by the process and we could see magical stories unfolding right in front of our eyes. Fortunately the school didn't require any prompting. Indeed, the staff at the school focused on building my confidence to keep going. And we did just that – kept going!

The 'guts' of the books were produced using an office photocopier and the covers were printed using the last remnants of cash from the petty cash tin. There was a book launch, the purchase of an ISBN and the books were bundled up and copies sent to the National and Queensland State Library. The children had become published authors, and I had become a teacher and a publisher! To say the process was immensely rewarding and satisfying and brilliantly wonderful is an excessive understatement.

Child Writes was born... I just didn't know it yet!

Teaching children to write and illustrate their own picture books became my focus. I could fit it in when my children were at school, and they didn't notice I was folding clothes late into the night, or packing lunch boxes as the sun faintly began to share its celebration of a new day. They also didn't care their uniforms may have missed being ironed, their vegemite sandwiches were a little squishy or that their sheets may not have been changed as often. They had their wish and I had mine.

This same fabulous school asked me if I was interested in coming back the following year. It wasn't a difficult decision. OF COURSE! I could do this!

Now I have talked and taught and edited and designed and published the works of well over two hundred children who have written and illustrated their own picture books. And the most magical part is that the children each donated a copy of their book to the children's ward at the local hospital. This gave them a sense of purpose. The books also offer incredible motivation to the children who read those books in the middle of the night, when the wards are quiet and their parents have gone home, when they see what a peer can achieve.

It is wonderful when a project you embrace begins to unfold in front of you – especially one which is led by instinctive responses and is supported by the generosity of those around you. The process of writing to share is marvellous! The thought of a gift being generated by you for another person is completely gratifying.

Imagine how every one of those children felt at Christmas time as they gave a book they had written and illustrated to their parent, grandparent, sibling or friend. Some people indulge in giving as they share their cooking; gift a quilt; create a painting, a drawing, a piece of decoupage, a photo scrapbook; or give time teaching others about their passion.

I write.

It doesn't get any better... and now it is your turn.

x

*Emma*

PS Just so you know, in the 'In the Words of a Child' section at the end of each chapter, these thoughts and musings are from children who have been through the Child Writes process and are now published authors.



# | **Imagine it**



It all starts with an idea.

Now, you can skip this bit if you surfaced this morning with a clear picture of a wonderful story for children in your mind's eye – if you can see your main character; a setting which wraps around the character like a second skin and you know exactly what is going to happen in the beginning, the middle and at the end of the story.

If it is kind of like pressing 'Play' and watching a movie, you may want to forge right ahead.

But, if you are not entirely sure what you are writing about, yet you have already envisaged the delight on the first recipients face – keep reading!

A staggering number of ideas are already in your head right now. Literally, right now! All you need to do is shut down all the other functions your body has to contend with, and allow time to focus on what is in your head. You have already consumed the sights and sounds which will become a character, a setting, or a plot. You have already had the thoughts, the feelings, and the experiences which will make your story believable.

Every one of us is capable of producing hundreds, if not thousands, of ideas over our lifetime. Given a pen and paper and a propensity to share the idea – *voilà!* You have the beginning of a story.

I have been working with children, teaching them how to write and illustrate their own picture books. What is so inspiring is that children are so relaxed about the process of creating a story and they simply need to be steered in the right direction. Think of it. We tell each other stories every day – stories about ourselves, our work and our adventures. We are already experienced without even realising it!

Story writing itself is simply layering – one layer at a time reflecting each part of the process; from the generation of an idea, the actual work of getting words onto paper; the multiple layers of editing and finally the end product.

Be warned, however: all along the way, you may experience discomfort. You may well be thinking, 'What a risky statement to include in the beginning of a book she wants us to read in its entirety!' I guess the truth of the matter is that often, when we experience this discomfort, or doubt, or lack of will, it is usually because we are lacking the confidence to push through this micro-pain barrier. The belief that you are capable of attempting things for the first time is called self-efficacy. If you have a high level of self-efficacy, you strongly believe you have the capability to pursue a set of actions which will ensure you reach your goal. If you have a low level of self-efficacy, you will probably give up, because you don't really believe you are capable of taking the steps to reach the end goal.

I mention this now, because each page from now on is to serve as a 'hand holder'. And if you for a second doubt you are capable of producing your own children's picture book, then I am right here to remind you that YOU CAN!

As soon as you doubt yourself, just do the tasks set out in front of you and you will find you have accomplished another step on the way to the end goal.

Anthony Gunn is a guru of fear management and translates self-efficacy into manageable exercises in his book, **Raising Confident, Happy Children**. It certainly will help you understand yourself if you read it (even if you have a handle on your own self-efficacy). In addition, by identifying areas which require support for your children's development, you may even find a raft of wonderful story ideas!

Before you start though, look around you. Is your working environment inspiring? Are you comfortable enough to sit there now for hour after hour? Do you need to be away from your home, your desk? Do you need good light, music, or to kick off your shoes? Whatever you need physically around you, it is important to be very comfortable.

## Get into the Right Frame of Mind

### *Breathe*

As I said earlier, all the ideas you may have are there – locked up inside your head! It is a matter of releasing the creativity which lurks within. Everything you have ever heard, seen, experienced or learned is already there, in your head. You just need to extract it. And the first step is to relax. There is nothing worse than being given a blank piece of paper with a tight timeframe and being told to just write... so, let's breathe.

Breathe? Yes, breathe!

Close your eyes. Use your finger to press down on one side of your nose and breathe in, listening to the sound of the air moving through your head. As you exhale, press the other side. Keep alternating, deep breaths, until you feel very relaxed. It is a simple exercise, which I use to start each and EVERY writing session myself. It will serve to accomplish a few things for you. Firstly, a foreign exercise may make you feel uncomfortable, and that's good because we often feel uncomfortable in the process of writing, illustrating or sharing, and we need to get used to it. Additionally, it serves as a circuit-breaker – a way to distinguish there is a change in the order of the day, and you are no longer a student or a worker, mother, father etc. Rather, you are now a writer and an illustrator. Finally, it allows you to relax, and relaxing is the BEST way to allow for the flow of ideas.

### *Draw*

#### Contour Drawing



Pick up a pencil in the OPPOSITE hand to the one you usually use. Hold a piece of paper firmly with your writing hand and now, looking at any object in front of you, start 'tracing' it with your eyes. Move the hand holding the pencil to mimic your eye movements. This actually has a name! It is called contour drawing. You are recording on paper the lines (or contours) which make an object recognisable to the viewer.

## Blind Contour Drawing

Now, you need to really push yourself and try to draw WITHOUT looking at the paper at all. Rather, you are going to look at the object 100 per cent of the time. You are 'blind' to the paper and you can only 'see' the object.

This exercise comes with a warning, though. You may find your drawings too funny to bear and you may end up laughing! Or, you will probably look at the drawing and think it too stupid to continue. To ensure you don't throw this book out the window right now, please remember that you are not trying to actually draw an object for a viewer. The aim is to connect your hand with your eyes.

Once you have conquered this, try again with your usual writing hand and you will be amazed at the outcome.

## Blind Contour Drawing: Hand

In this exercise, your hand is the object. Mean, aren't I!! For many people, hands are one of the most loathed parts of the body when it comes to drawing.

- Glance at the clock, so that you can time yourself. You want to know how long you can concentrate and draw without looking at the paper or away from the object.
- Anchor the piece of paper in front of you on the desk with a piece of tape.
- Hold the pencil in your writing hand.
- Use your opposite hand as the model.
- Do not lift the pencil from the page, making it a continuous line drawing.
- DO NOT LOOK AT THE PAPER AT ALL.

The premise behind this exercise is to help you improve your hand-eye communication. Again, you need to pretend the pencil is attached to your eyeball. Wherever your eye moves, it makes a 'mark' via your pencil.

It is an extraordinary truth that it is the ability of an artist to translate WHAT they see in front of them into some form of permanent medium, like paper or a canvas – rather than what they THINK they see. The Honourable Professor Lord Robert Winston actually recorded the eye movements of an artist for his

## A SIDE THOUGHT...

### Right Brain vs. Left Brain:

A great deal of study was conducted in the late '60s regarding the function of the brain. In response to the findings of the day, ***Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*** drawing methods were developed by Betty Edwards in the late 1960s and early '70s. These methods were immortalised in this bestselling book, published in 1979. Since then, Dr Edwards' drawing methods have been used all over the world to teach millions of people how to draw.

In the classroom, we often discuss the roles of the right side of the brain vs. the left. Basically, the left-hand side is responsible for being analytical and seeing parts of the whole. Think of the stiff, angular lines which make up the letter L. It is responsible for us using phrases like 'That doesn't look correct', or working through a formula in a maths test.

The right-hand side is the creative side which allows us to draw what we see, making it easier to think about shapes and where an object (or part of an object) is in relation to something else. There is a fabulous exercise on the website (link below) and you can actually experience first-hand the 'click' you feel when you successfully move from the left-hand side of your brain to drawing with your right-hand side. Have a go! **[www.drawright.com](http://www.drawright.com)**

award-winning BBC television series, *'The Human Body'*. The artist spends the majority of his time looking at the subject. When Lord Winston attempted to produce the same image (a portrait), he looked at *the canvas* the majority of the time.

You are certainly now in the right space to be creative. There are a lot of wonderful ways to stimulate this creativity, and you may use one or all of these idea-source exercises.

## The Ideas Toolbox

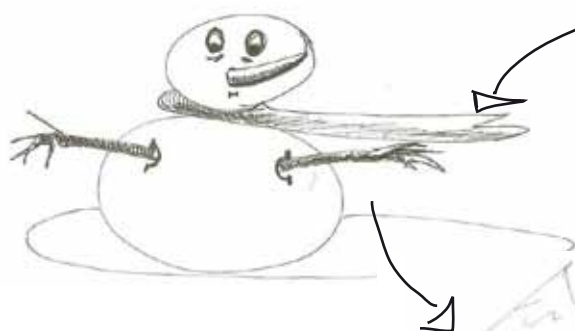
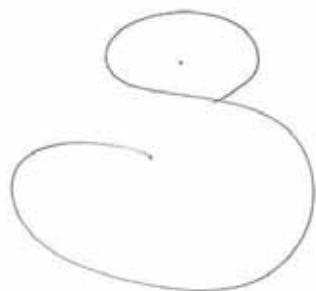
### *Idea Source: Doodle Drawing*

This is the first of many idea-creating tools which we will explore. It may actually help you to create a character. For those of us who remember Mr Squiggle and his ability to extract yet another image from a few seemingly innocuous marks, this exercise is self-explanatory (of course, when I mention the guru of images, the children look at me as though I have gone quite mad).

For those of you not familiar with Mr Squiggle, start with a blank piece of paper.

On the paper, make one or more quick marks with your pencil. Within these marks is something! It is a bit like looking at clouds as they pass and 'seeing' images within the formation.

What can you see? Rotate the paper around if you need to. Once you have 'discovered' something, then go over the lines you would like to embellish and add the extra lines you need, to develop your character. Simply ignore the lines you don't need for the moment. Don't rub them out.



As the character 'emerges', use all your drawing tools (cross-hatching, shading etc...) to give it more form and to indicate the light source. Now, start including more information, for example, the background.



Quickly make some written notes on the edge of the page if you have had a 'flash' of an idea about a story which may belong to the character.

### *Idea Source: Frankenstein*

Don't worry, we are not going to mimic Victor Frankenstein (created by Mary Shelley in 1818) and head off to the butcher shops and dissecting rooms in order to source body parts to create a creature. Rather, the concept of construction from disparate parts gives rise to the opportunity to create a truly unique being, using just words.

I was first exposed to this exercise by James Moloney. I fortunately went to the wrong room – I had booked into an illustrator's workshop and ended up in a professional development workshop listening to James talking to a group of educators about how to teach the construction of a story to children! With a predetermined list of possible attributes, James encouraged us to 'create' our own character.

## A SIDE THOUGHT...

### The Attributes of a Writer or Illustrator:

Recently, I sat in a lecture theatre and listened with bated breath to a well-known author discuss exactly this. She believes you have to be born a writer or born an illustrator, and unless you are that person, give up. Well, that is a thought, but what if you didn't know you were born with these skills? I really believe all of us are born as storytellers and all of us are born capable of drawing.

After a brainstorming session with children, we decided that a writer and/or an illustrator is simply someone who is happy to share their thoughts! Some organise these thoughts in such a way as to be transferred via a mechanism we know as books. Others use mediums like magazines and more recently, web-associated mediums like blogs, twitter, Facebook, newsletters and online website diaries.

What do you need, then? Other than the desire to share, you need some paper and a pencil (or a computer and a keyboard). Even better, invest in a visual diary which can be your workbook, your recording mechanism for your story drafts, and it will become the beginning of a reference file. Everything you need!

### Create a Human Character

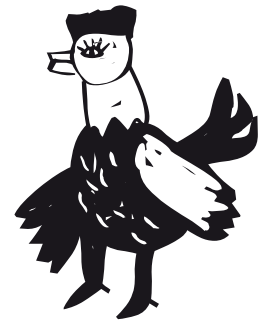
1. Construct your own prompt-list of generic physical attributes belonging to a human (hair colour, skin tone, mouth shape, eye colour, teeth, age, gender, clothes, etc).
2. Put the list away for a while, because chances are you will already be formulating a character in your mind's eye.
3. After some time, take out the list. Do not think. I mean it! Take ten deep breaths and just do not think. Just respond to the list as quickly as possible.
4. There, it's as easy as that! In front of you – using words not lines – you have created a character. Now, if you are feeling very brave, draw the character!

### Create a Non-Human Character

When I teach, I write the list and give the children choices from which they select one each (it is faster than those little hands writing, writing, writing).

See over the page for a short list as an example. Select one characteristic from each and *voilà* – a creature is born.

- Covering the body: feather, fur or scale?
- Extremities of limbs: talons, nails or claws?
- Shape of extremities: arm, limb, fin or wing?
- Mouth: fangs (razor-like or pointed?), tongue or teeth?



Now, with this written list in front of you, draw what you have in your mind's eye.

Again, as we did with the doodle drawing, give yourself a five-minute window to write some notes down which may yield a possible story.

**In that session with James Moloney, my answers for my character were banal at best! However, when the teacher beside me read out her responses, I began to see a character and instantly, I thought of a setting and a plot in which she would thrive – a Young Adult manuscript in the making.**

You can also work with the same process, different parts coming together, using drawing not words. It is fun to 'answer' the above questions with a pencil rather than a pen.



## *Idea Source: Brainstorming*

A brainstorm is defined as a 'brief psychological disturbance'. Brainstorming is 'to think quickly and creatively, to have an intensive group discussion in order to generate creative ideas and usually stimulate problem solving.' So, this is more fun if you are with a group of people.

The success of brainstorming relies on instinctive replies to a question. For example, if I say "Red" you may straight away answer "Stop" or "Lady Beetle". Record the first thing or things that come to mind. It is also really much more fun if you do this in a group.

## Step One

Appoint a scribe. It is useful to have someone in front of the group, recording the responses.

## Step Two

Start with the stimuli. For example, in our brainstorming sessions, we write down (on large pieces of butchers' paper – which yes, are from the butcher!) all the things children...

1. Worry about
2. Find fun to do
3. Hate about a birthday party or a significant event
4. Like about a birthday party or a significant event
5. Wish they had to call their own
6. Find the most challenging about having a sibling
7. Are scared or hesitant to try
8. Imagine that they are doing



### Step Three

Read aloud the list of answers, one at a time. Are there any stories to be created from this? For example, siblings. Children often find that having a sibling can be a nightmare, but then they may realise that they can't imagine not having them either.

#### *Idea Source: Use a Problem*

From a marketing perspective, constant discussion revolves around the product development and sales opportunities which are borne from solving a problem. The same rule applies to storytelling. Earlier I made mention of **Raising Confident, Healthy Children** and noted that by identifying areas which require support for your children's development, you may find a raft of wonderful story ideas. There is a seemingly unending list of problems which may need solving. Listen to those around you for more issues. Whilst writers are discouraged from moralising, offering assistance is appreciated!

How do you solve the problems of demonstrating love to disobedient children, deal with death or support a relationship with grandparents? The books, **Where the Wild Things Are**, **Jenny Angel** and **Dancing with Grandma**, all consider these issues. Now, please don't think 'Well, they have covered the issue,' because a different voice in a different time in different circumstances may deliver support to different people. It is a big world out there!

So what problems do you know are out there just waiting to be solved? What problems have your children experienced or talked to you about recently? What problems did you face as a child? Are they still relevant to children today? List everything that comes to mind, and then go back through the list, to identify the seed of a story idea.

#### *Idea Source: Own Experience*

Whether it is a first-hand experience with bullying or an adventure on a family holiday, all stories contain an element of our own experiences. It is difficult to escape the influence of our own experience, and as it colours our world, it is easier to work with it than against it.

Consider creating a list of topics or thoughts. When you are bereft of ideas, refer to it – kind of like the list of characteristics for the Frankenstein exercise. Then simply start writing. It is an exercise which not only helps connect with the right-hand side of your brain, but also relies on instinctively responding to the stimuli, and this can often yield many promising thoughts.

1. What made you laugh today?
2. What did you think of while you ate your lunch?
3. Where have you been today?
4. What is the earliest memory you recall?
5. If you weren't you, who would you be and what would you be doing?
6. What was the happiest moment of your life?
7. What was the saddest moment of your life?
8. What were you most proud of doing as a child?



You are tapping into your own world for references to possible characters or scenarios which may inspire you. An opening about a gross, sticky, smelly banana in a lunch box could be the beginning of a very funny story, as could the dreaminess of remembering tasting a mango for the first time.

When looking for a story idea, you may source an idea from your own diary. Reading about a torrid experience whilst in a totally different frame of mind, and recording your thoughts again can produce a very interesting story. The diary entry could be the story, or be used as a launching point or rather, the departure point for a new story.

## *Idea Source: Reference Files*

Images can provide a source for a story idea. Have a collection of magazine pictures, personal photos or even random photos at hand. Photos from your childhood may invoke a powerful response and give you something very personal to write about.

With the image in front of you, try to make up a story in a 'quick-as-a-flash' response. The more instant the response, the more instinctive it is, and instinct usually produces the best stories!



The little boy in a Telstra advertisement campaign was the launching point for a short story. I couldn't help but wonder who he was and where he came from. His clothes were rather old fashioned and this led me to think of life for a little boy growing up in the 1950s. Who was his mother, I wondered? This I answered as I wrote, *Two for One*.

It is a simple, enjoyable thing to set up a reference folder. Peruse magazines at your leisure and rip out pages, or neatly snip those images which appeal to you – whichever method is your style. There is no need to intellectualise the process. Don't ask yourself 'Why?' when you choose an image – just let yourself respond to it. The collection can also include lists of words which are accumulated in the same fashion.

When you are trying to find an idea to write about, flick through the images or words slowly. It is an exercise which is akin to looking at clouds. See what you can see!

## *Idea Source: Music*



A gorgeous exercise which can create magic is writing to music. You can go beyond writing with music playing in the background. The objective is to create a list of words which match the music.

When you do the same exercise with a paint brush in your hand and a colour palette ready, there are short marks for sporadic, short notes, long swirls for melodies, red for anger or love, and so on.

Additionally, you can have a list of songs which you already know provokes a powerful response from within. Anything by Donovan Frankenreiter makes me feel upbeat, yet relaxed. The Australian Crawl song

'Reckless', still completely polishes me off and I return to being a twelve year old, not quite sure how to process the world around me. And then Don McLean's 'American Pie' induces such a state of camaraderie, that after listening to it and then immediately beginning to write, I find that friendship is my focus. Find what works for you.

### *Idea Source: Sound*

You may not believe it, but this is a true story from a workshop I did with Year Three students. I was talking to them about sound being able to trigger thoughts which can either become a story or provide a launching point for a story. They closed their eyes, and I asked them to take a deep breath and then listen. Just then, from the building site next door, there was a sharp, resonant clunk as metal hit metal. We brainstormed a couple of ideas, including being a miner, a sculptor, a building site falling down and a puppy being stuck, a new house – my goodness, enough for us all to write something different.

Sound, like smell, provokes a deep internal instinctive response. We are afraid of a horn, love the sound of laughter, are terrified of lightening and cringe at metal crunching in a car accident. Whatever our personal experiences, the sounds which resonate around us when we simply close our eyes and listen can provide an idea.



### *Idea Source: Previously Written Stories*

In the indefatigable Christopher Booker's definitive text, **The Seven Basic Plots**, he explains that the first written story, 'Epic of Gilgamesh', is about overcoming the monster. The kingdom of Uruk had fallen under the terrible shadow of a great evil, Humbaba. The hero Gilgamesh, armed and willing, sets out on a long and dangerous journey. He confronts the evil and during a titanic struggle, it seems as though all is lost. By some supernatural feat, Gilgamesh kills Humbaba, and returns to the kingdom, triumphant. If it sounds like a blurb for a James Bond movie, let alone Beowulf, it is; because it has the same storyline. Stories written before can provide a framework for writers today.

***“The symbolic language in which stories are dressed up meets with an instinctual pattern of response which is already programmed into the child’s own unconscious.”***

**Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots***

This is not a recommendation to copy someone else's work, rather the realisation that even in demonstrating you are incredibly creative, the basic plot will pre-date you!

Sometimes, a spark of inspiration for a new story can ignite your imagination when reading an already published children's picture book. It might come while reading new or favourite books to a child or grandchild. Or you could spend a pleasurable afternoon at your local library, reading a wide selection of picture books, and waiting for inspiration to strike. This is not about plagiarism, rather using the inspiration gained from another's work to generate a unique idea for yourself.

If you are worried about infringing copyright by seeming to mimic someone else's story, just do a little research. In Australia, under copyright law, the author does retain copyright, even after they have died! You have to wait for seventy years before it becomes public domain.

## *Idea Source: The Lightning Bolt*



Sometimes, we don't even need to know where an idea comes from or why it is there. Usually more often when you are particularly relaxed and probably happily right-brained anyway, an idea will literally appear in your head!

Always keep a pen and paper on-hand. I have a notebook by my bed. Inexplicably, I may wake in the middle of a particularly interesting dream, which continues playing. I have tried to work out if it is because I am hot, cold, overtired, or if I simply overslept – yet there is no consistent physical state which I can reproduce to come up with the wonderful movies! Launching out of bed and cracking your toes as you collect the doorframe on the way to the computer doesn't help. It is much better to write some key words on a notebook, happily roll over and go back to sleep.

The same inconvenient but wonderful thing can happen at any time. I know a writer who keeps a paint pen in her car, so she can write on the glass of the window beside her! And another who makes a quick phone call to his own answering machine.

## *And Finally – Breathe Again*

Look at that – just as we started with breathing, we finish with breathing.

***“You don't need one idea for a book, you need thousands!”***  
***Jackie French, CYA Conference, 2009.***

Next time you are sitting daydreaming and someone interrupts you – you can inform them that you are 'working'!

Now, back to work!

Time to put pen to paper...

### *In the Words of a Child*

"Doodle drawings are very simple. If you are right-handed you use your left and vice versa, then scribble. For me it was fun because I could make pictures from the lines. When you do this you have to use your imagination. I did. It really helped me with the drawings I did in my book. It helped me a bit as well to show the emotions of the characters in the book. It is almost impossible to make a mistake with doodle drawings."

Domi, age 10, author & illustrator ***The Last Day of the Wet Season March***, about using doodle drawings to create ideas.



