

# How to Make Up a Bedtime Story, According to a Children's Book Author

By Paige Towers • July 11, 2016 at 7:02pm

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Parents, relatives, babysitters: you know the deal. A bedtime story is a favorite part of most kids' presleep routines. But in order to capture a child's imagination, as well as teach them a lesson without revving them up so much that they want to leap out from under the covers, requires one to follow a precise recipe.

Brooklynbased writer, understands the formula better than most. She's the awardwinning author of more than 100 children's books including "Mirror Mirror," "City Lullaby," and the "Tallulah" series, and her books frequently appear on "best" lists by and

. Singer also for aspiring children's books writers on her website. We spoke to Singer over email in order to get some basic bedtime story advice so that any intrepid parents out there who want to concoct some tales for their children and give bedtime a bit more of a personal touch.

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Marilyn Singer,

*Time Magazine The New York Times provides*

*advice*

## Do your homework first

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via GIPHY

Singer's number one piece of advice? Read. A lot. "See what's out there and try to get that rhythm in your bones," she says.

Before you open that "Awesome Bedtime Story" Google doc, you first need to immerse yourself in the genre. Reacquaint yourself the classics and crack open contemporary tales, too — as many as you can until you get an idea of what themes and cadences often appear.

As Singer writes, "A picture book has to move along, to make every word count."

And for those of you out there who may be thinking, “How hard can it be to write a story about a caterpillar eating some fruit or something?” remember that this is a job that requires years and years of practice to get good at, just like anything else. As Singer writes, “A picture book has to move along, to make every word count. For that reason, among others, it is a form that’s hard to write well.”

## Know Your Audience

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Are you a fan of books that involve fictional dystopian futures or protagonists struggling to make sense of reality in which they may no longer play a part? We’re into it. But children under the age of six will likely be confused/horrified by existential questions about death before bedtime.

“Try to get into the mindset of a child,”  
Singer says.

Singer’s advice? Stick to subject matter they’ll relate to. “Try to get into the mindset of a child,” she says. In terms of fiction,

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Singer says the most appealing characters and situations are those that strike an emotional chord. So think dragons and unicorns over dictators and anarchists; pandas and polar bears over people who've been strapped to a gurney and institutionalized for severe mental illness. You get it.

## Understand Your Character

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Figuring out your character's motivation is essential to spinning a satisfying yarn. "An important question is 'What stands in the character's way?,'" says Singer. Thus, even if your protagonist is a mouse who wants a cookie, or a freaking amoeba who wants to, say, find another basic lifeform friend — there should still be conflict in getting that thing.

Another important point? Making your characters real. "I once heard about a little girl who announced that she didn't like a story" Singer writes. "When asked 'Why?', she replied, 'Not enough trouble.' A good story usually has obstacles the protagonist has to overcome."

## Don't Teach a Lesson

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via GIPHY

They may be tantrumthrowing, Cheeriochewing monsters who may or may not be potty trained, but kids are still tiny humans. And most humans don't like people telling them what to do, which is why Singer explicitly advises "against deliberately trying to teach anything" when writing a book for children.

When talking about her popular series character, Tallulah, who learns lessons (like achieving big goals takes a lot of resilience) on her own without ever being explicitly a lesson by an adult, Singer writes, "[...] I dislike the pedantic, so I try hard to have her learn things organically." Kids seem to agree.

*given*

## Stay Simple

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When Singer wrote a Tallulah series book called “Tallulah’s Tutu,” the opening line was this: “Tallulah just knew she could be a great ballerina—if only she had a tutu.” Straight. To. The. Point. Why is this important? Because as Singer says, pointing to an old journalistic adage: “don’t bury the lead.” In other words: introduce the character, conflict and theme right away.

So in the land of children’s books, simplicity is key. Figuring out how to preserve that sentiment while simultaneously keeping those low attention spans engaged is even more crucial. (Sentences like, “The ball is red,” don’t stand firm past the age of children who still investigate what objects are by sticking them in their mouths.) The key lies in sticking to short, simple descriptions while also creating a vivid and meaningful story with simple language.

# When writing bedtime stories, introduce the

# character, conflict and theme right away.

“Strip away those phrases and descriptions you just love, but that don’t really add to the story or character,” says Singer.

## Keep it clean

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The goal of a bedtime story sesh is for kids to drift away into sleep afterwards. So, while some old timey bedtime tales are steeped in violence, lay off subjects including death, blood and the like. As Singer writes, “[A good bedtime story] would have a satisfying ending that makes you go, “Ahh.” And no animals would die in it. Ever.”