

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF WRITING FOR CHILDREN

Thou Shalt Not Talk Down to Your Readers

Some beginning writers make the mistake of trying to appeal to kids by writing in a manner that can only be called “cutesy.” Resist this urge! Cute gets in the way of clarity. Clear writing, evocative writing, truths simply put—these are what we strive for when we write for kids. Though our characters may be children, or bunnies, or what-have-you, their lives and problems and the way we write about them must be those of the real world put into a language that children can understand. Maxim Gorky writes that “You must write for children the same way you write for adults, only better.” Make that your motto.

Thou Shalt Not Sermonize to Your Readers

It is good, of course, to have a purpose when you write; purposeless writing does nothing for reader or writer. But if you write in order to deliver a moral, or to give children a message—God is good, drugs are bad, peer pressure is terrible—you are writing in the wrong form. As Samuel Goldwyn says, “If you want to send a message, write a telegram.” Leave the morals to Aesop. Story comes first and foremost. If you write a good story, with characters we care about, the message or purpose will take care of itself.

Thou Shalt Not Strain to Rhyme

Many writers, inspired by the example of Dr. Seuss, write silly rhyming texts. Don’t get me wrong—I *love* rhyme. But only if the writer can actually write rhyme that flows effortlessly, that doesn’t strain to fit a rhyme scheme. You know what I’m talking about. (For example: “Byron Bunny was a rabbit with taste / His carrots he never ate in haste / He chewed them long and he chewed them slow / And to the market he would go.” What’s essential there? Hard to know.) If you find yourself writing lines and adding words simply to get to the end of the line and to make a rhyme, you are filling your story with empty calories. In children’s books, as in poetry, every word counts; not a word can be wasted. So any words that are filling out a line to make a rhyme will rankle, will strike the reader as so much empty air. If you can write rhyme that is worthy of a Richard Wilbur or a Jane Yolen, then fine, rhyme away.

Thou Shalt Avoid Cutesy Names

Do not give your characters names such as Marilyn Mouse, or Clarabelle Cow, or Leon Lion. These sorts of names partake of the first sin, and reveal that you feel your story won’t appeal to readers without being tarted up with silly, condescending names.

Thou Shalt Not Waste Words

Picture books are very short texts. In order to get an idea of just how short most picture book manuscripts are, check out a dozen picture books from the library and type them up as manuscripts. *Where the Wild Things Are*, a sixty-four page picture book, is only about a page of text. While some picture books are longer, few are longer than five or six pages (and those are for older readers). If you find that your manuscript is longer, ask yourself if it is for older readers. If it is not, ask yourself why you’re writing so much. You may be writing *too* much, lavishing too much attention on your own prose to the detriment of the flow of the story. In picture books more than in any other kind of writing save poetry, *less is more*.

Thou Shalt Not Indulge in Self-Consciously “Poetic” Writing

Some writers feel that in order for their writing to have “poetic” weight, it must be purple. Alliteration, anthropomorphism, and other devices that are fine in moderation but dizzying when used together find their way into such prose. For example: “Spiteful, skulking storm clouds clustered over Harry Hippo’s heavy hairless head, hanging there like the chores he hadn’t done before going out to play in the murky, mellow mud. O woeful hippo who ignores the suggestions of his mother hippo!” And so on. Strive for clean, direct writing. There is more poetry in one clear line than there is in the most “poetic” line. Take this line from Edward Eager: “A woman named Mrs. Bick had been hired to care for the children, but she couldn’t seem to care for them very much, nor they for her.” There’s a lovely musicality to that line that owes itself to nothing other than directness.

Thou Shalt Not Be Afraid to Cut Your Favorite Lines

“Kill your darlings” someone once said about writing, and his or her point is well taken. Our “darlings” in writing are often those lines we’ve most belabored, where the writer’s hand is showing more clearly than elsewhere. If you love a line too much, you should ask yourself why: Is it because the line is particularly effective? Or is it because it sounds “writerly”? If the latter, find your pen and strike it out.

Thou Shalt Love Language

Not so much the prettiness of certain words (“Gossamer,” for example. People love this word and it occurs in more submissions than I can count), but the way language can not only tell a story but be part of that story. If a noisy business is happening in the story—a storm tearing down trees, say—there are all sorts of crunchy words that add to the effect of the description. Things “crack” and “break” and “snap”—you can hear the abrupt actions in the surprising consonants that end those words. Be alive to that possibility in your writing, and your writing will gain a vital dimension.

Thou Shalt Not Send Editors and Agents First Drafts

“Endless vision and revision” T.S. Eliot writes, and he only got that line after many drafts. A first draft is only that, and if a writer has not run his or her drafts past trusted readers or workshop members, then that first draft will likely have faults that the writer can’t see. An editor or agent *will* see those faults, and will return that draft post haste. Why waste your postage or a professional’s time? Let your work sit, get feedback, and revise and revise and revise. All good writing is rewriting.

Thou Shalt Not Obey ANY Rule to the Detriment of Good Writing

As with anything in life, rules can be broken if you are certain that you are breaking them wisely and with good reason. But the important thing is to break the rule knowingly, with malice aforethought.