

Make Your Own Way: The Creative Process Behind Writing and Illustrating a Children’s Book

Senior Project

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By

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Abstract

For years, art and visual storytelling have been popular methods of teaching and entertainment, especially towards children. There are many different forms of media that are used to visually tell a story, but one of the oldest and most common are books. Children’s books – especially those geared towards younger kids – rely on illustrations to enhance the story and keep their audience engaged. This paper focuses on explaining the creative process I used to make my own illustrated children’s book. Using advice given by professional writers, editors, and illustrators in articles and tutorial videos, this paper divides the months-long process of developing and self-publishing a children’s book into seven easy steps. Hopefully, this research will encourage other illustrators to try their hand at creating and publishing their own books too.

Make Your Own Way: The Creative Process Behind Writing and Illustrating a Children’s Book

My Senior Thesis project involved tackling the creative challenge of writing, illustrating, and self-publishing my own children’s book. It is my goal as an artist is to become a professional children’s book illustrator, and the idea of making and publishing your own book can be daunting. Perhaps, it is because many do not know what tools to use or what process to follow. However, through my research and my own experiences, I was able to narrow the process of creating a children’s book down into seven easy steps: 1) conceptualization and research, 2) writing and editing the manuscript, 3) character design, 4) storyboarding and cover design, 5) illustration, 6) page layout and adding text, and 7) publishing.

The first step, conceptualization and research, is the foundation of your book; it is when you decide the format of your book, who your book is for, and what your book is about. Important things to determine in this stage are the: genre, target audience, writing style, story concept, length, and dimensions of your book. There is a wide variety of kid’s books out there ranging from non-fiction to comedic fantasy, from middle-grade chapter books to baby board books, and from simple words and letters to interesting rhymes. For my own story, *Blank Canvas*, I decided on making a non-rhyming, realistic-fiction picture book targeted towards 4- to 8-year-olds about a cat learning to deal with the grief of losing its owner. The book’s format is vertically-oriented, sized at 8x10 inches, and 36 pages long with every page containing an illustration. It is good advice to look at what other authors/illustrators have done for their children’s books for inspiration and research, especially those who are working with the same genre, audience, or style that you plan to. I looked at many books myself, but the one that influenced me the most was *I’ll Say Goodbye* by Pam Zollman because it was also a grief-based book that was targeted towards kids 4-8 years old. Make sure that in this stage you create a schedule for yourself along with deadlines to follow because this whole thing is a lengthy process that can take many months to complete.

Moving on to the second step is when you start to put your research into practice. In this stage, you are actually writing the entirety of your story – meaning the beginning, middle, and end – beyond the basic concept outline you started with. It is important to not only focus on the content of the story, but also how that story is told because children in different age ranges also have different reading levels and attention spans. For example, board books for kids 0-4 years old are about teaching basic colors or letters to an audience with little to no reading comprehension, so these books rely almost entirely on pictures rather than 100 words. Meanwhile, picture books targeted towards kids 5-8 years old tend to have a much wider vocabulary and an entertaining storyline that addresses more complex themes. It is why it is important to look at the writing styles of other authors who cater to the same target audience you do. Analyze what vocabulary they use, how they structure their sentences, and who many words they use. Additionally, have other people review and give feedback your manuscript because you will go through many rounds of editing and revision before reaching your final draft.

The third step is character design, which also marks the beginning of the illustrative side of this whole creative process. When designing the characters of your story, it is best to start off with a short list of descriptive words for each character and then sketching multiple variations of that character. Afterwards, chose the best elements from your variation sketches to combine to create the final version. Try to make your designs consistent stylistically, in a way that also is cohesive with the genre of your story. Personally, I worked in a cartoonish style that was inspired by the artwork of children’s book illustrator, Neha Rawat Battish, as well as the character designs from the movie *Klaus* (2019). Although it is not required, I found it is useful to create a character sheet for each of my main and recurring side characters in order to keep my depictions of those characters consistent. A character sheet is typically composed of that character’s figure turnaround – which is just a drawing of the character from the front, side, back, etc. – as well as a final drawing of that character in color. This designing stage is not just for characters, but it is also for designing the style of the story’s setting and locations because stories can be based in other time periods, cultures, or even planets than present-day American suburbs.

Step four is when you create the storyboard and cover design of your book. A storyboard is a series of illustrations that depict a story, so this is when you would be depicting scenes from your manuscript visually. When creating a storyboard, start with thumbnail sketches – small sketches around the size of your thumb – of the entire layout of your book. Don’t forget to leave blank spaces for where text would go in your thumbnail sketches. By seeing the entire book layout when making your sketches, it would be easier to create spreads – illustrations that encompass two pages side-by-side – and to see how your overall designs flow from page to page. After making your sketches, and having them be reviewed by another person for feedback, create a colored version of your storyboard. Make sure your entire book, including the characters – follow a main color palette for consistency and to prevent the illustrations from looking disjointed. The same method should also be used for the thumbnail sketches of the cover design. The cover is the first introduction that people have to your book. It should allude to the main theme of the story and include images of at least one of the major characters.

Step five is the illustration stage, which is pretty straightforward. At this point in the creative process, you should already know how you will be illustrating your book. Illustrations can be made digitally or by using traditional media like pen, watercolor, collage, etc. Just be sure to scan your finished illustrations into a digital format when using traditional media. There is plenty of digital art software to choose from like Adobe Photoshop, Clip Studio Paint, or – my personal favorite – Procreate. When creating illustrations to be printed out, the most important things that you need to take into account are the color profile, margins, and bleed. Color profiles define how the colors we use in digital art will be displayed and the main ones you need to know are RGB and CMYK. Color profiles for digital screens are RGB and CMYK is for printing, so make sure that you adjust your settings to CMYK when setting up a digital canvas. Bleed refers to the extra space in your illustrations that will be trimmed off during production. Always add a little extra space to the dimensions of your digital canvases – usually 0.125 to 0.45 inches – when doing any illustrations that will take up a full page. Self-publishing platforms, like Amazon’s Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP), should list their requirements for the different bleed sizes that correspond with the final dimensions of your book. The dimensions for your book cover differ depending on how many pages are in your book as well as its format as a paperback or hardcover book. It is likely that your self-publishing platform lists requirements for this as well.

Step six is the stage when you add the text to your illustrations. The process for this may differ depending on what digital art program you are using. Personally, I would recommend using Adobe InDesign for its easy-to-use page layout software. When inserting the illustrations into a page layout, don’t forget to include the copyright page, title page, and – if desired – a dedication page at the front of the book. Copyright pages serve to identify who owns the intellectual property, when the book was published, and also list the ISBN (International Standard Book Number). Be sure to export all the pages of your finished illustrations together as a single PDF when they are ready to be printed.

The last step, step seven, is the publishing stage where the final manuscript pdf of your illustrations is uploaded into your self-publishing program. I would recommend Amazon’s KDP platform, especially if you are subscribed to an Amazon account. With this platform, you are able to publish your book and have an e-book or printed version be distributed through Amazon worldwide. Amazon grants full rights to the owner of the intellectual property, so the book can be simultaneously published through other platforms at the same time. KDP also offers free ISBNs that act as a numerical ID for your book. All books require an ISBN to be published and they can be purchased through official websites – like Bowker Identifier Services. However, ISBNs are expensive and can often go for as much as $150 per ISBN. Additionally, Amazon publishing offers up to 70% royalties, and it can take as little as 24 to 72 hours to be available to the public.

Although the creative process of making a children’s book may be time-consuming, it is well worth the effort. The entire process is surprisingly not too complicated: conceptualizing, writing, designing, illustrating, and publishing is all it takes to become a self-published author/illustrator. Advancements in technology have made it so much easier for ordinary people to self-published authors, so why not take advantage of it. Even if you do not intent to fully-publish a book, just creating a children’s book or writing a simple, short story could be a fun creative project in and of itself.

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