Think Positive, Stay Productive

Because you participate in this kidlit industry, by default you’re a motivated person. Few people could stomach the level of patience and persistence required, so you’ve already scored points in the positive column. Build on that by making an attainable goal list that fits your lifestyle. Find outlets that will keep you motivated and productive like visiting our SCBWI-WI blog, re-reading past Creative Tap issues, or trying out real idea-mining feats found at Story Storm.

Feats, Failures and the Future

by Rochelle Groskreutz, Co-Regional Advisor

As you hunker down for a long, frigid Wisconsin winter, maybe you feel cozy and creative, ready to make some real strides on your work(s) in progress. If you’re like me, you feel sluggish and about as inspired as a barren, icy branch.

This means you have two options: 1) Watch every show with 100+ episodes on demand without writing a single sentence or drawing a single sketch because you’re “idea-mining.” 2) Get something, anything, done.

Pretty sure you don’t need me to tell you which option will help you get closer to your long-term kidlit goals, and which will be a total waste of time. To get something, anything, done, focus on the 3 Fs: Feats, Failures and the Future.

Failing Must be an Option

If you’re a perfectionist like me, failure paralyzes you. You prevent yourself from even trying by taking the “What’s the point if my effort goes nowhere or I screw it up?” mind-set. Get over yourself. Just do, because you can’t even take credit for failing if you’re not trying. Take it from Winston Churchill: “Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.” Another source to inspire you to try and let yourself fail is Dr. Carol Dweck’s Growth Mindset approach.
Always Onward, Never Backwards

Another paralyzing factor that will hold you back is dwelling on the past. Stop brooding about that stingingly so-close rejection from your dream agent or editor. Don’t treat the past like a recliner that you comfortably sit and sulk in; use it as a stepstool that propels you upward and onward. A great way to keep yourself future-focused is to attend one of the many events that our amazing organization has to offer, such as:

- **Is Self-Publishing Right for You?** FREE webinar on December 2, 2018. [Click for more info]
- **Creating Compelling Characters** FREE SE Meet-up on December 11, 2018. [Click for more info]
- **Winter Webinar Agent Day Event: First Impressions** on January 20, 2019. [Click for more info]
- **SCBWI Winter Conference in NYC** February 8-11, 2019 (sold out; waitlist spots available). [Click for more info]
- **The Wild Wild Midwest Conference** May 3-5, 2019 (registration opens early February—stay tuned!). [Click for more info]

Those in-a-funk days will always happen—spend them watching one on-demand episode, then do something that makes you feel better. On those other days, get crackin’, and remember that any size accomplishment matters.

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Call for Submissions

**Authors & Illustrators:** We need your help! If you would like to be an article contributor for an upcoming issue, contact Sandra at nicholssandra5@gmail.com for more details.

**Illustrators:** if you would like to share your artwork in an upcoming issue, contact Leah at danzillustrator@gmail.com for more details.
Most of us on the journey toward publication, or who proudly carry the title of author, can recall slights along the way, big and small. They seem no less painful when we reach adulthood. When slights arise, I challenge you not to deflate, but rather to inflate. Consider slights fuel for your artist’s soul. Get determined to overcome the obstacle.

Like any other industry, publishing is rife with gatekeepers. Imagine them as sentinels standing guard, deciding who enters the gates, and who doesn’t. Most barriers are temporary if you put in the work.

My lesson: View each ‘no’ as getting closer to ‘yes.’

The Artist’s Fire Burns Bright and Cannot Be Denied

I didn’t fully embrace the title of artist until later in my career. Like many who have been repeatedly shushed and re-directed into more ‘sensible’ careers, I initially chose the respectable career of journalism. I enjoyed a career in radio news at NPR affiliate, WUWM and ABC affiliate, WISN, both in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In 2001 after a long corporate career at We Energies and Journal Communications, I founded Hyler Communications, a full-service public relations and marketing company based in Glendale, Wisconsin.

I had the memorable experience of booking a client’s consumer electronics product on the QVC home shopping channel, and appeared on air hawking the product! I also enjoyed two years at NBC affiliate Today’s TMJ4, as a commentator.

In the midst of this very satisfying career, I was writing creatively. I trekked to Hollywood, California many times, pitching my screenplays to total strangers. No options. No movie deal. But, several screen writing awards provided encouragement for the artist’s fragile soul.

My lesson: Get comfortable with being uncomfortable. That’s where the growth occurs.

Social Media: A Necessary Tool in Your Artist Arsenal

Whether you are a social media enthusiast or can’t stand the idea of connecting over the Internet, you should embrace it. Why? Social media bypasses gatekeepers and opens up new lanes of opportunity. I invest time in my Blog, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn. These social media platforms have been very fruitful for me. A short list of successes:

I’ve met authors from around the globe. I recently partnered with a sci-fi author from Chicago whose first book was published out in September 2018. We appeared together October 4 at a Chicago bookstore, Women and Children First, and have agreed to look for more events in Wisconsin and Illinois.

I’ve also met an Australian author and received an invitation to participate in a panel she organized at a New York bookstore.

I’ve connected with J.K. Rowling’s editor, Sarah Odedina. I reached out to her prior to a master class she was conducting in France. To my dismay, I couldn’t stay...
My Writing Journey: Lessons Learned

in the country to attend. So, I boldly wrote her on Twitter and pitched my manuscript. She agreed to take a look, sent back some lovely comments, and passed. Still, I count this as a fond career highlight!

I’ve connected with teachers and educators. It’s easy enough to jump online, find various groups, and listen to the chatter before strategically asking a question to highlight my book or to snare an appearance.

I’ve met bookstore owners. My publisher sent out a mailing on my behalf to more than 600 independent booksellers. The added benefit of connecting on social media provides a personal touch. I’ve gotten to know several bookstore owners in this fashion, and I will include them in future tours.

I’ve engaged with top children’s authors like Kwame Alexander and Tomi Adeyemi. (If you don’t know them, look them up!) I’m a current member of Alexander’s Swing Team, a group of 500 private Facebook fans who signed up and were selected to receive an advance copy of his new book *Swing* and receive access to special rewards. Through this team, I have the added benefit of connecting with bookstore owners, librarians, and educators.

Of course, many of your favorite SCBWI authors, both seasoned and newbies, are on various social media platforms. Follow their posts and speed up your learning curve!

**My lesson:** Key to effective networking is to boost others as much as you self-promote. Use your writing expertise in service of other people.

Say Yes to Public Speaking Opportunities: Conferences, Book Festivals, Schools, Libraries

In the eight months that my middle grade novel has been on the market, I’ve learned readers love to make a personal connection. If they’re impressed, they’ll buy a book, or two, or several.

Granted, I was a successful public speaker, appearing at business conferences and events well before I was published. As a PR and marketing firm owner, I also teach public speaking. Trust me. Develop your public speaking skills. I’m convinced that outside of authoring a terrific book, nothing will build your career faster.

**My lesson:** Don’t go out in public without it. Not American Express. But, your book marketing collateral.

Get Way Out of Your Comfort Zone: Pursue Far Flung Residencies and Writing Conferences

Artist and writing residencies are my thing. I love to travel. And I don’t hesitate to embrace an artist residency, with artists of all types, rather than solely writers. After all, your book will need a cover, and possibly, inside illustrations, so build your artist appreciation muscle. Residencies on Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts and in Marnay-sur-Seine, France (south of Paris) have enriched my artistic sensibilities and confidence. I’ve learned from artists throughout the U.S., Japan, South Korea, Brazil and many more distant lands. Many of us who met several years back continue to boost each other through emails, social media and in person.

For an artist, beautiful scenery, a writing table and living with like-minded souls is a winning combination. Choose the residency or conference that best suits you. Visit [www.pw.org](http://www.pw.org).

**My lesson:** Great artists live all over the world. Get out and meet them. The experience is priceless. >>
SCBWI: A Jewel to Embrace

I couldn’t in good conscience end this article without extolling the virtues of SCBWI. I first joined in 2015, took a look around, and asked myself, “What kind of a group is this?” For someone who has spent much of their career in the corporate world, publishing is a peculiar industry. It’s great to get insider information, but also to question and bring one’s own experience to the table. This is a special group indeed. I have devoured The Book many times, used its contract examples to educate myself before hiring an entertainment attorney for my first publishing contract, presented and attended workshops and conferences, learned about school visits and key elements of an author website, made friends, admired the range of talents and the giving spirit of members.

My lesson: Don’t overlook the riches! SCBWI is your gateway to success.

Lora Hyler’s middle grade novel, the first in a three-part series, was published in March 2018 by HenschelHAUS Publishing. “The Stupendous Adventures of Mighty Marty Hayes” features multicultural superheroes, science, and spy gadgets, with real-life spies and history added for good measure. In 2001, Lora founded her public relations and marketing company, Hyler Communications. She’s looking forward to her next artist residencies in Door County, WI and Cassis, France.

Blog: www.lorahylerauthor.com/blog
Twitter: twitter.com/HylerPR
Facebook: www.facebook.com/lora.hyler.5
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/lora-hyler-0b12425/

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Still Writing: The Perils and Pleasures of a Creative Life by Dani Shapiro

Review by Amanda Coppedge Bosky

I love craft books that delve into the intricacies of plot, character, or theme and provide me with tools to improve my drafts and revisions. But I also love books that explore the writer’s life from a more philosophical perspective—why do we do what we do? How do we remain optimistic despite crushing rejection?

Still Writing falls in the latter category. Memorist, novelist, and writing instructor Dani Shapiro structures her book in three sections: Beginnings, Middles, and Ends. Each section is filled with short chapters of vignettes, observations, or advice about writing and life based on her own experiences.

For example, in the “beginnings” section, one chapter is titled “Inner Censor.” Shapiro shares her experiences with her own inner censor whose presence is so palpable, the author feels as though it sits on her left shoulder, whispering in her ear. It says things like “This is stupid” and “What a waste of time” when the author starts work on a new project. But instead of advising that writers ignore their censor or try to defeat it, Shapiro describes how she has learned to coexist with hers—and gently divert it. “The I.C. ... should be treated like an annoying, potentially undermining colleague,” she advises. “Try managing her with corporate-speak: Thanks for reaching out, but can I circle back to you later?”

The whole book is full of refreshing, reassuring ideas such as this. It also takes a deep dive into Shapiro’s personal life, recounting how she dealt with two difficult parents and their deaths, as well as a son who experienced a near-fatal childhood illness. The author shares painful, no-holds-barred details about her difficult past and how she diligently wrote her way through it. By the end of the book, it is apparent how Shapiro’s life and writing are intricately entwined. “Writing saved my life,” she declares. “It is my disease and my cure.”

I highly recommend this book for people who enjoy autobiographical writing books such as Anne Lamott’s Bird by Bird or Stephen King’s On Writing. Shapiro’s book would especially appeal to people who have had difficult lives and who are undertaking the painful work of turning personal trauma into art. I recommend it to anyone looking to broaden their perspectives and perhaps find a few new quotes to write down and take with you on the path of their wild writing journey.

For permission to reprint this review, contact Amanda Coppedge Bosky at aerinha@gmail.com.
The Write Way
Writer Tips

Backstory Unmaligned
By Judy Dodge Cummings

As William Faulkner famously said, “The past isn’t dead. It isn’t even past.” Our history informs our present. When faced with a major decision, our brains sift through past experiences to determine our next move. These memories and the beliefs we connect to them are the backstory of our lives.

However, writers are often warned to steer clear of including backstory in their novels. In *On Writing*, Stephen King says, “The most important things to remember about backstory are that (a) everyone has a history and (b) most of it isn’t very interesting.” Donald Maas cautions in *The Fire in Fiction*, “Backstory bogs things down.” When Sinclair Lewis was once asked how best to handle flashbacks, he replied, “Don’t.”

With all due respect to these masters, the fault lies not with backstory itself but how writers execute it. Deadly info dumps. Flashbacks frequent enough to cause whiplash. Naval gazing that leaves readers with a brain full of belly lint.

Writers who ignore a protagonist’s past put their stories in peril. Simply put, backstory is anything that happens before the novel opens. A more useful definition comes from Lisa Cron, author of *Story Genius*. She describes backstory as “the fundamental ‘why’ that drives what a person does, what they say, and...what they actually mean when they say it.” The essence of a story is how the plot changes the protagonist internally. Readers cannot understand a character’s inner transformation if they do not know what the character was like before the novel began. Without backstory, there is no story.

The secret in writing good backstory is to weave the past seamlessly into the present. Here are some examples of backstory done right.

**Flashback:** Deliver backstory through a full or partial scene from the past.

*Sarah, Plain and Tall* by Patricia MacLachlan

I looked at the long dirt road that crawled across the plains, remembering the morning that Mama had died, cruel and sunny. They had come for her in a wagon and taken her away to be buried. And then the cousins and aunts and uncles had come and tried to fill up the house. But they couldn’t… (5)

**Dialogue:** Reveal backstory subtly to build suspense.

*The Girl Who Drank the Moon* by Kelly Barnhill

“I have been sent,” Antain continued...“to tell you that the other Elders are ready...Everyone is accounted for.”

“Each one? There are no shirkers?” >>
“After last year, I doubt there ever will be again,” Antain said with a shudder.

“Pity.” Gherland checked his mirror again, touching up his rouge. He rather enjoyed teaching the occasional lesson to the citizens of the Protectorate. It clarified things. (6)

Narrative Summary: Convey backstory in brief passages that compress time.

**Tuck Everlasting**

by Natalie Babbitt

It was the strangest story Winnie had ever heard...Eighty-seven years before, the Tucks had come from a long way to the east, looking for a place to settle. In those days the wood was not a wood, it was a forest...a forest that went on and on and on...they happened upon the spring...

'It was real nice,’ said Jesse with a sigh. ‘We stopped and everyone took a drink, even the horse.’” (37-38)

Tips for Writing Backstory Effectively

Before you reveal backstory, first hook your reader into the front story.

1. Layer backstory into the front story so the reader can experience how the past impacts the protagonist now.

2. Use flashbacks judiciously so as not to confuse the reader.

3. Orient the reader in time and place at the start and end of the flashback with dialogue, a sensory impression, action, or change in verb tense.

4. Dole out important backstory in bits and pieces to build mystery.

5. Keep passages of narrative summary relevant and brief, and break them up with action.

6. Limit backstory to the specific turning points in the character’s past, the key moments related to your protagonist’s internal struggle.

Backstory is really the first half of your story. It is the experiences and beliefs your protagonist has when he appears on page one, knowledge that will guide his or her every decision. Find a balance between backstory and front story. Do not allow your characters to dwell in the past, but do not let them ignore it either.

Revision Exercise: Comb through your WIP and find a section of backstory that is not working. Experiment by writing this information in the three styles illustrated above—dialogue, flashback, and narrative summary. How does your story change with each version?

For permission to reprint this article, contact Judy Dodge Cummings at judydodgecummings@gmail.com.
Tucked away in the deepest, darkest corner of my closet is a cardboard box filled with a gold mine of inspiration. It’s the place where I quickly throw all of my old sketches, scribbles, and half started (but mostly forgotten about) dummy projects when I need to clean the house in a hurry. If I’m currently working on or inspired by something, then I’ll make an effort to find a nice place on my desk. Unfortunately, anything that ends up in this box has lost its magic... but not forever. Whenever I need a little creativity boost, I go back to this box. At some point in time, I had a really great idea to draw something. Maybe I was just playing around, maybe I was too busy, or maybe I lacked the motivation to develop the idea further. Whatever the reason, the timing just wasn’t right. With a fresh set of eyes, and a new enthusiasm, I have the tools I need to find just the right bit of inspiration to spark a new idea.

So as the craziness of the holiday season rolls around, here are my techniques for doing a little housekeeping:

1. **Be a Squirrel**

Save it all! If you made a cool doodle on a post-it note, save it. If were playing around with a variety of character designs, save them. If you were brainstorming backgrounds or layouts, save those too. And if you were working on more developed stages of drawing (cleaned up roughs, dummies, etc.), then definitely save those. Put delicate and large pieces in a safer place, but for everything else, just gather it up and bury it away in a box. After all, who knows when you’ll need a squirrel sketch you drew a few years ago to bedazzle a newsletter?

2. **Let it Marinate**

Inspiration can strike at any time, but now just might not be that time. Give your ideas a little time to rest.

3. **Go Back to the Box**

When you run out of inspiration or just want to take a trip down memory lane, go to your box (or shelf, or closet, or studio, etc.) and pull out anything that inspires you. Maybe it is a character sketch that sparks a new story idea. Maybe it is a style you played around with that you want to revisit. The possibilities are simply endless. >>
4. Clean Up

At some point, the box will hit capacity so it’s good to clean it out from time to time. If you put multiple sketches on pages or leave a bunch of blank space, feel free to take scissors to your pages. Cut out the drawings you want to save, recycle the ones you don’t, and re-use the blank paper for new sketches. If you have a lot of things that are very similar, then there is no need to keep all 10 sketches of the same squirrel looking to the left. Save the ones that are most inspiring or offer something unique, and get rid of the rest. If there are sketches that are so rough that you can barely tell what it is, then there is no reason to keep it. And if you completely hate something, then odds are you will still hate them next time you visit the box.

Be sure to keep loose character sketches and anything that really conveys motion or emotion—tighter sketches sometimes lose this magic so it is good to be re-inspired. Keep anything where you played around with style. It might not be what you are creating now, but it might be something fun to play around with in the future. And keep everything that’s a “maybe”—it’s a terrible cleaning technique, but better safe than sorry.

5. Repeat

If you’ve run out of inspiration again, put your sketches back in the box and work on something else. Just be sure to revisit it again.

So whenever you hit a wall with ideas, take a trip down memory lane. Dig up your old projects and look at them with fresh new eyes. Who knows what might spark a new idea or direction to take an unfinished project.

See more of Leah’s work at LeahDanz.com

For permission to reprint this article, contact Leah Danz DiPasquale at danzillustrator@gmail.com.

Share your Artwork!

Illustrators: We would love to feature your artwork in an upcoming issue of Creative Tap! Contact Leah at danzillustrator@gmail.com for more details.
Mark Your Calendars!
Upcoming Events

Wild Wild Midwest Conference
Co-hosted by SCBWI-WI, the 2019 Wild Wild Midwest Conference, “Let’s Go to the Fair!” will be held May 3-5 at the conference center of the Chicago Marriott Naperville, in Naperville, Illinois.

Folks will be coming from far and wide for a weekend of intensives, presentations, and breakout sessions. We have a group of 30+ blue-ribbon faculty leading the festivities!

Registration for this event will open sometime in February. Keep your eyes open for announcements on our SCBWI-WI web-site.

Chicago Marriott Naperville
Naperville, IL

December 2, 2018 | 3:00 pm – 4:30 pm
Webinar: Is Self-Publishing Right for You? with Silvia Acevedo
Grab the hot cocoa and settle in for an informative chat with Silvia Acevedo, journalist, novelist, and SCBWI-WI Indie/Self-Publishing Coordinator as she examines the world of self-publishing, the pros-and-cons, how to go about it, and how to decide if it’s right for you. Self-publishing has changed the world of publishing, making even traditional minded writers and publishers re-thinking the best way to reach the reader.

RSVP to Silvia at silvia@silviaacevedo.com

December 11, 2018 | 6:30 pm – 8:30 pm
Creating Compelling Characters
Harry Potter—the boy who lived, Anne Shirley—the imaginative orphan, Clifford—the big, red dog. What do they all have in common? Compelling characters who keep readers wanting more. But what makes a character compelling? Discover the answer with Silvia Acevedo author of the God Awful Series, described on GoodReads as “a new chapter on the ancient gods’ bad—and hugely entertaining—choices.” Learn tips and ideas for making your characters compelling and making readers care.

Muskego Public Library
573W16663 W. Janesville Road,
Muskego, Wisconsin

RSVP to Becki at bkidd8@wi.rr.com

January 20, 2019 | 1:00 pm – 4:30 pm
Webinar: WI-SCBWI Winter Webinar Agent Day Event: First Impressions
It’s all about first impressions, your first page, your first chapter, the first time you query the agent, the first time the reader discovers your book. From the comfort of your home, hear it from the agents’ mouths what to do and not do. Opportunities for private feedback on queries and first-page reviews.

For further inquiries about our 2019 Agent Day, email Joanna via winterwebinar@gmail.com

See more of Rebecca’s work at rhirschillustration.com

Illustrator Spotlight
Rebecca Hirsch
© Rebecca Hirsch

Illustration © Rebecca Hirsch
Non-SCBWI Events

April 4 – 7, 2019

UW-Madison’s 30th Annual Writers’ Institute

Get the creative juices flowing and hone your writing skills at this four day conference. Workshops on writing craft and navigating the publishing world are led by top writing coaches and instructors from UW-Madison’s Continuing Studies program.

Further info: uwwritersinstitute.wisc.edu/writers-welcome/

April 26 – 28, 2019

Untitled Town Book and Author Festival

The third annual Green Bay Untitled Town Book and Author festival will once again offer three full days of writer workshops covering all areas of the writing craft from conception to publishing and marketing. Here’s your opportunity to learn from renowned national and regional writers of all genres. The best part, this is all free.


May 19 – 25, 2019

Novel-In-Progress Book Camp and Writing Retreat

Need to get away? Surround yourself with 100 acres of nature and inspiration. In its sixth year, the Novel-In-Progress Book Camp is sponsored in part by the Chicago Writers Association and the Off Campus Writers’ Workshop (OCWW). Geared towards chapter book writers of all fiction genres who have a work in progress, the six-day intensive workshop includes one-on-one coaching, group critiques, publishing sessions, and coaching on pitches and query letters.

Cedar Valley Retreat Center
West Bend, Wisconsin

To apply: https://www.novelbookcamp.com/to-register/

June 17 – 21, 2019

Write by the Lake

UW Madison, Wisconsin

Five days of intensive workshops for writers of all levels. This successful writer’s retreat is in its 20th year. The success is not surprise. Workshops are taught by leading educators and writers. Attendees come from across the United States.

To apply: continuingstudies.wisc.edu/conferences/write-by-the-lake/

Author Visits

December 1, 2018 | 10:00 am

Author Visit: Jan Brett

Jan Brett, New York Times #1 bestselling author/illustrator whose books have earned The New Yorker’s and Parents’ choice for “Best Children’s Books of the Year” is coming to Madison to celebrate her newest book, The Snowy Nap. Fans of Hedge the little hedge-hog from Jan’s bestselling picture book The Hat will be delighted with this charming prequel richly illustrated in Jan’s signature detailed style. This event is sponsored by independent book store A Room of One's Own and in partnership with the Wisconsin Book Festival.

Madison, Wisconsin
Madison Public Library Central
201 West Mifflin Street

December 1, 2018

Author Visit: Ryan T. Higgins

Bruce the bear is back! Author/Illustrator Ryan T. Higgins will be in the Milwaukee area celebrating the publication of Santa Bruce, the second Bruce the bear picture book. Meet Ryan and get a signed copy of Santa Bruce. Books will be available for sale at each library location.

10:00 am West Allis Public Library
7421 West National Avenue

12:00 pm Cudahy Family Library
3500 Library Drive

2:00 pm Greenfield Public Library
5310 West Layton Avenue

March 12, 2018 | 4:00 pm

Author Visit: Soman Chainani

New York Times bestselling fantasy writer Soman Chainani will be in the Milwaukee area for book signings of A Crystal of Time, her newest installment in her acclaimed children’s fantasy series The School for Good and Evil. This event is presented by Boswell Books.

Location to be determined. Keep your eye on Boswell Books https://www.boswellbooks.com/upcoming-events

Share your Events!

Send info on upcoming summer author/illustrator events taking place between June 2019 and October 2019. Contact Sandra at nicholssandra5@gmail.com. Together we grow!