

## Manuscript Checklist

If in doubt, work it out! Where do YOU feel something isn't quite right? "Everything that an editor or agent has pointed out that might be flawed about a manuscript I sent, I usually knew wasn't quite right before I sent it."<sup>1</sup>

*Not every point on this checklist will apply to every manuscript, but they are good items to consider.*

### MECHANICS

- Did you use proper manuscript format?
- Are you showing, not telling?
- Is it as tight as it can be? Remove adverbs, unnecessary adjectives.
- Is the manuscript an appropriate word length?
- Did you use correct grammar (tense, spelling, etc.)?
- Did you use correct punctuation? Especially for dialogue?
- Did you proof read carefully to catch typos?
- Is there variety in the sentence structure?
- Is there variety in the paragraph length?

### LANGUAGE

- Is your language appropriate for the age of audience?
- Beware alliteration: "Little Larry leapt" "wanted what no one wanted" "she cursed and cried and called"<sup>2</sup>
- Beware overuse of "And" or "But" at the beginning of sentences.<sup>3</sup>

- Watch out for clichés.
- Weed out Weasel Words: really, finally, just, very, so, then, next, seems, seemed, began...
- Are you overusing: as, looked, that, turned?
- Search for pet words and phrases that you've overused.
- Are you using active verbs?
- Checks for sentences that begin with "there" and reword them.
- Are you using specific nouns?
- Did you use at least 3 of the 5 senses?
- Did you resist the urge to explain? Make what you say clear and important the first time and you won't have to retell the reader.
- Does the story flow when read aloud?

### STORY

- Does the story stay in the main character's viewpoint?
- Does main character solve the problem?
- Is the story conflict identified early on?
- Is the story idea age appropriate?
- Is the story believable?
- Does the story have action?
- First sentence—is it compelling? Does it hook the reader?
- Does the story come full circle? Tie back into the beginning?
- Have you avoided coincidences and convenient plot solutions?
- Beware of being didactic or preachy.
- Is your setting clear?
- Does the story fit the genre?
- Is it clear who your audience is?

1 The Novel Writer's Toolkit, page 15

2 The First Five Pages, page 49

3 "Language: Let's Get Logical" by Cindy Rogers, Children's Writer Guide to 2006, pg 167

- Does the story have a universal theme?
- Does your story take a predictable/same old story idea\* and give it a new twist?

\* Done to Death Plots:

- Child who's different, difference saves the day
- Overcoming smallness, shyness, etc.
- Terrible at sports, but stays on team
- Crotchety senior citizen won over by cute child
- Ugly team becomes beautiful

### CHARACTER

- Do we know the age of the main character?
- Is the character appropriate for the age of the audience?
- Will the reader be able to quickly identify the main character of your story?
- Does your main character grow or change?
- Is your main character unique and three dimensional?
- Is your main character sympathetic or easy to identify with?
- Is the character's voice unique?

### DIALOGUE

- Is it clear who is speaking?
- Do your characters have distinctive voices?
- Avoid most speaker attributions meant to replace "said" (exclaimed, retorted, responded, inquired, etc.)
- Do you use action tag lines as well as simple attributions (said, asked)?
- Is the dialogue natural sounding?

- Does the dialogue move the story forward?
- Destroy dialogue that is there to convey information to the reader.
- Watch out for characters "speechifying."

### NONFICTION

- Did your research include primary sources?
- Is your research showing? (overwhelming the piece with every detail you learned)
- Is your information integrated with "story"?<sup>4</sup>
- Is your manuscript too general or is it tightly focused?
- Is it well-organized or scattered?

### FOR PICTURE BOOKS

- Does it have good rhythm and meter? (this doesn't mean it is written in verse)
- Is there plenty of action for an illustrator to illustrate?
- Is the story sacrificed to make it fit into verse?
- Would this be more appropriate as a magazine piece?

### EDITING

- Have you let your story sit and gone back to it later so you could look at it with a fresh eye?
- Have you gotten any feedback from your peers about this story?

### MARKETING

- Have you read any books by this publisher?
- Is this the type of story they publish?

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<sup>4</sup> Read Predator! by Bruce Brooks