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.”

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 proofread 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”
☐ Beware overuse of “And” or “But” at the beginning of sentences.

☐ 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
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, buts 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 you research include primary sources?

Is your research showing? (overwhelming the piece with every detail you learned)

Is your information integrated with “story”?°

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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° Read Predator! by Bruce Brooks