

Top 10 “Mistakes” I See as a Critiquer
with Jill Dana @JillDanaBooks

#1 Inconsistency in Worlds & From Characters - World Building

Workshop Exercise

- Show the opening of your manuscript (or scene) to someone sitting next to you. Don't tell them anything about your story ahead of time.
- Ask them to describe the story world or rules of the world.
- Is this consistent with your intention?
- Switch manuscripts and do the same for each other.
- If you didn't bring a scene or manuscript, and you're working on a new idea, brainstorm a word bubble with all the words that relate to the character and the character's world in any way.
 - Credit for the brainstorming exercise goes to Lisa Wheeler (from a FL SCBWI conference).

Extra Exercise

- Sketch a map or write a description of each location for your own reference

Extra Questions

- Do the character's actions make sense for that character?
- What would the character's prior knowledge be?

2 Not Kid-Friendly (& Category of Book)

Workshop Exercise

- Write why a young reader will care about your story. How will a young reader relate to your story?

Extra Questions

- What are the entry points for a child?
- Does the main character have agency in the story? Is the story empowering to a young reader?
- What is the prior knowledge of your reader?
- What are the developmental milestones for the age range of your reader?

#3 Pacing, Structure & Category of Book - Too fast, too slow, or inconsistent pacing

Workshop Exercises

For picture books,

- Take your picture book and break it into 12-14 scenes.
- Are there a variety of potential settings/looks?
- Something new with each page turn?

For novels,

- Check the ends of chapters and/or scene changes. Do the ends of chapters/scenes build suspense or tension that would make a young reader want to continue reading? Put yourself in your young readers' shoes.

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For all stories,

- Do you think this story is right for the intended age of your audience? For the real-estate available in the book category?

Extra Questions

- Does everything happen in one location? (If so, more like a short story or chapter.)
- Are your characters always in the same setting? Could you exchange one setting for a more interesting setting or a variety of settings that still fits the story tone?

#4 Needs More Emotion The Specific Becomes the Universal

Workshop Exercise

- Where is the heart of your story?
- What is your personal connection?
- Why is this story important to you?
- How can you connect this with specific character details or world details?

Extra Questions

- What's the takeaway?
- I've heard editors ask "why does it matter?" "Why should I care?"
- Is there an element of hope?
- What are specific details in your story that connect with the heart of your story?

#5 Balance of Showing and Telling

Workshop Exercise

- Choose a "telling" sentence or passage from your story. (A hint to find one is to look for words like "was", "thought", "looked".)
- Try transforming that sentence or passage into a "showing" sentence/passage. Do you think that works or doesn't work for the scene?

#6 Amp Up the Language

Workshop Exercise

- Pick a line or passage from your work-in-progress and try adding a poetic device to it.

#7 Too Many Words/Pages? Too Few Words? Word Count

Workshop Exercise

- Take a scene from your manuscript.
- Which words are not moving the story forward?
- Try omitting some words or lines. (About 2 minutes)
- Choose a partner, show the new version to your partner, with the words crossed out.

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- Ask your partner to read it (trying to ignore the crossed out lines) and ask your partner if it makes sense or if they have any questions.

#8 Needs More Layers or Hooks

Workshop Exercise

- What are some layers or hooks in your story?
- What makes your book unique?
- How is it different or alike from other books with similar characters, settings or themes?

#9 Balance of Dialogue, Action & Narration

Workshop Exercise

- Read through your story and highlight “dialogue”, “action”, “narration”.
- What are the proportions?
- What do you think the balance is in your overall story? For a specific scene?
- Which of the three feels out of balance? Which could you add more of?
- It’s not a science, but if your scene or story feels like it’s missing something, it might relate to this.
- Try adding more of one to a scene in your novel or to your picture book.
- Does it make it stronger?

#10 Not Enough Tension or Conflict

Workshop Exercise

- Note on your manuscript when the conflict is revealed.
- Is there tension on every page (or for pbs in every spread)?
- Does there need to be tension on every page?
- How can you increase the tension of a scene? Thoughts?

Extra Questions

- What’s the inner conflict and external conflict of your story?
- When is this revealed?
- Is it relatively early in the story? This is often important for young readers.
- Are you continually raising the stakes?
- Does the character change? Remember learning is changing.

Extra Questions

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This handout will be available for download, for workshop participants, until January 31, 2023 on www.JillDanaBooks.com.

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MENTOR TEXTS

Books

Hear Me – 2022 by Kerry O'Malley Cerra (Author)

The School for Good and Evil (Book 1) – 2018 by Soman Chainani (Author), Iacopo Bruno (Illustrator)

Butternut – 2022 by Jill Dana (Author), Rachel Tan-Hwee (Illustrator)

Butternut & Buttercup – 2023 by Jill Dana (Author), Rachel Tan-Hwee (Illustrator)

Simon the Hugger – 2022 by Stacy B. Davids (Author), Ana Sebastián (Illustrator)

Just Wild Enough: Mireya Mayor, Primatologist (She Made History) – 2022 by Marta Magellan (Author), Clémentine Rocheron (Illustrator)

Moldilocks and the Three Scares: A Zombie Tale – 2019 by Lynne Marie (Author), David Rodriguez Lorenzo (Illustrator)

Three Squeezes – 2020 by Jason Pratt (Author), Chris Sheban (Illustrator)

Lulu and the Missing Tooth Fairy – 2022 by S E Richey (Author), Jhon Ortiz (Illustrator)

Trouble With Truffles – 2022 by S E Richey (Author), Jhon Ortiz (Illustrator)

Night of the Living Cuddle Bunnies: Devin Dexter #1 – 2017 by Jonathan Rosen (Author)

Remembering Mom's Kubbat Halab – 2022 by Medeia Sharif (Author), Paran Kim (Illustrator)

TV Shows

Never Have I Ever, Netflix

Old Enough, Netflix

The Secret Life of 4, 5 and 6 Year Olds, All Documentary

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKImKIHRHPM&list=PLyRqK5BQ11x2ZXApV33Sn7ZeVRa_qq0pI

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WRITING RESOURCES

Books

Understanding Show, Don't Tell: And Really Getting It – 2016 by Janice Hardy (Author)

The Magic Words: Writing Great Books for Children and Young Adults – 2016 by Cheryl Klein (Author)

Rules For The Dance: A Handbook for Writing and Reading Metrical Verse – 1998 by Mary Oliver (Author)

The Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms – 2007 by Ron Padgett (Editor)

Plotting Your Novel with The Plot Clock by Joyce Sweeney Jamie Morris Tia Levings (Author), Jamie Morris (Author), Tia Levings (Author)

Writing Picture Books –2018 by Ann Whitford Paul (Author)

The Essential Guide to Publishing for Children, 2022, SCBWI

Writing with Pictures: How to Write and Illustrate Children's Books – 1997 by Uri Shulevitz (Author)

Websites & Classes

Children's Book Academy

Janice Hardy's **Fiction University**, Take Your Writing to the Next Level - <http://fiction-university.com/>

Janice Hardy's Blog - <http://blog.janicehardy.com/>

Ready Chapter 1

Society of Visual Storytelling

SCBWI National and Regional

Tara Lazar's Blog - **Writing for Kids (While Raising Them)** - [https://taralazar.com/](https://taralazar.com/Picture-Book-Dummy)
Picture Book Dummy, Picture Book Construction: Know Your Layout, February 22, 2009, <https://taralazar.com/2009/02/22/picture-book-construction-know-your-layout/>

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