

## **Kids Are Authors: Writing and Illustrating a Classroom Book**

Each year Scholastic Books hosts the Kids Are Authors contest.

([http://www.scholastic.com/bookfairs/contest/kaa\\_about.asp](http://www.scholastic.com/bookfairs/contest/kaa_about.asp)) It is a competition open to kids in grades K – 8 which encourages kids to use their reading, writing and artistic skills as they work together to publish a book. Book groups can be as small as four students or can include the entire classroom. I have done this project with kids in grades 3 – 6 at both public and private schools. A class I worked with won an honorable mention placing in the top 25 of over 2,000 entries. They received \$500 in Scholastic books for their classroom.

### **Summary**

I start by exposing the kids to a broad classes of storytelling styles. I then work with kids to brainstorm ideas which we narrow to a specific story. Each child then contributes to the process of writing, editing and illustrating the classroom book. This is a fabulous opportunity for kids to practice teamwork and communications in a setting that encourages thoughtfulness and creativity. Children derive a strong sense of pride and accomplishment upon completing the book and submitting it to the Kids Are Author's contest. Emphasis is placed on the process, and the goal of creating a book. If we win, great, but the goal is the book, not the contest. A better option in some classrooms would be to create a book without the contest as an end-goal as it imposes a fixed deadline (March 15<sup>th</sup>) that may not work in some scheduling scenarios.

### **The Process**

Creating a book is a multi-month process in which the children are sometimes working with me, and sometimes with their classroom teacher.

#### **Part One – What is a story? (one classroom session)**

This is a reading and discussion session. I arrive at the classroom armed with piles of picture books. After reading each one aloud I work with the kids to dissect the structure of the story. Is the story a “hero’s journey” type of structure with a protagonist whose problem is to be solved? Is there a clear beginning, middle and end? Or is the story more of a “day in the life” story in which we track the main character through a day? If so, what makes this day different? Is the story a “fact dump” that simply tells me lots of things about a particular person or topic? If so, how does that author keep that interesting?

During this session we also discuss fiction versus non-fiction, and look at the way illustrators reveal aspects of story through pictures instead of words.

#### **Part Two -- Brainstorming! (one classroom session)**

Depending on the group size and number (a single classroom might have several book groups—I would work with the teacher to determine whether one or several groups would be best for that classroom) we go through a brainstorming session to come up with story ideas. We open with a discussion about

where stories come from, then have what typically turns out to be a pretty high-energy rapid-fire session in which the children share concepts, titles, brief story lines. Positioned at the front of the classroom I record every idea, encouraging the children to go deeper and farther with their thinking. This typically results in dozens of story possibilities. We return to the first session and talk about what category some of these fall into.

### **Part Three – Choosing a Concept (one classroom session)**

The list created in Part Two tends to be very long. With my experience and knowledge both of working with children and as a writer I hone the list down to six or fewer story ideas selecting those that would be the most fun, age appropriate, and feasible to both write and illustrate. I present the shortened list to the teacher first, then to the children, who vote to determine which idea we will develop as a book.

### **Part Four – Developing Our Story (as many classroom sessions as time will allow – typically about 4-6)**

I work with the teacher to budget how many sessions we will have and set a timeline for accomplishments.

Referring back to what we learned in Part One about how stories are written we use an “And then what?” technique that encourages kids to think WAY outside the box and turn an idea into a story. This is a very organic process in which teachable moments pop up all the time. Discussions take place about story structure, character development, word choice (simile, metaphor, active verbs, colorful adjectives)—we touch on all aspects of storytelling.

Using a storyboard technique we break the story into scenes and further into pages. We determine the words that will appear on each page, resulting in a first draft of our story. Revise, revise, revise! We talk about the fact that writers do lots of revisions to make their story the best it can be, and that our story will continue to evolve.

### **Part Five – Creating Our Book (two – three classroom sessions)**

By this time we have already determined the illustration concept for each page and the specific language that will appear on it. We now revisit published picture books, focusing on the artwork and how it compliments and adds to the text. We will discuss options for creating our illustrations (collage, pen, crayon etc.) and figure out the best way to create our pages. Each child is assigned a page to illustrate; a model that has worked well in the past is to assign these by lottery. Typically at this point I invite an illustrator friend to come in and spend a session talking about illustration tips.

After each child does a first draft of his/her page, we go through a series of revisions, and each child is invited to submit cover art. The teacher and I work together to choose the cover, or children can vote.

When final pages are completed I scan them into Photoshop and superimpose the text onto the pages. I bring a printout to the classroom where the kids do a final edit before we submit our work to the contest.