



Write for a Reason

Writing Fiction for Children and Young Adults
from a Christian Perspective

10 Easy Ways To Instantly Improve Your Story (That You Might Not Have Thought Of)

by Janet Wilson

As a Christian children's book publisher ([Dernier Publishing](#)) I receive a steady stream of book proposals from writers who earnestly want to share the good news of Jesus with children and young people through their stories, or who just want to create inspiring stories from a Christian perspective. This is thrilling – I'm always looking for manuscripts that have that **X factor**.

But not all do.

Several years ago I set up **Write for a Reason**, an online community, to encourage and help Christian writers to make their stories the very best they can be, because we all need help with the talents we have been given! At **Write for a Reason** we have a [facebook page](#), [free writing tips](#), a [monthly programme](#) you can subscribe to (for a small monthly fee) and a [seven week writing course](#) if you really want to go deeper with your writing.

But first things first! Here, as promised, are your **ten easy ways to instantly improve your story**:

Improvement #1: Use All the Senses

You have almost certainly used all five senses at some point in your story, but would adding more improve readers' engagement? What if you added the aroma of coffee, or the stench of a manure heap; the crunch of fresh snow on the path or the sound of an aeroplane flying

overhead; the softness of the cat's fur or the hardness of a cold floor? If you have your character biting into a soft doughnut oozing with delicious filling, you will almost certainly make your readers salivate! Sight, sound, taste, touch and aromas – try to get a few more in (but only if they sound natural, of course). :-)



Improvement #2: Increase the Pace

Young people are used to everything moving quickly these days . . . and that includes the stories they read. **Whether your story is long or short, make every word count.** If a word, sentence, paragraph or scene doesn't move your plot forward, set the scene or help readers to get to know your characters better, **cut it out.** A short, gripping story that captivates your readers and leaves them thrilled and breathless is better than a long-winded book they may not finish. Check your descriptions – are they too wordy? Do you have scenes where nothing much of interest happens (e.g. a family meal)? Have you repeated yourself anywhere? ***Is there a shorter, better way to say anything at all?*** Be ruthless; cut, cut, cut!

Improvement #3: Shorten Long Speeches

Related to the last point: check your dialogue for long speeches. We all know that dialogue in novels isn't like speech in real life, but as writers we need to make our dialogue *sound realistic*. Long speeches by one person are better cut up into smaller sections. It will make your story more readable. Promise!

Improvement #4: Change “Telling” into “Showing”

Stories where readers are told what is happening can be dull. An example of this might be telling

readers that a character felt sad, or that it got dark. Instead of telling readers, you can “show” them. For example, instead of **telling** readers that a character got angry, **show their face going red and their lips tightening**. “Showing” is more than a simple “telling” of the facts. It's more illustrative and dramatic, and **builds a better picture in your readers' minds**, drawing them into the story and taking them closer to the action and the atmosphere. As Anton Chekov famously wrote, **“Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.”** Showing requires more thought than telling, but it's worth it for the result.



Improvement #5: How Have You Ended Your Chapters?

Chapters cut a story up into manageable chunks, but there are so many brilliant ways of ending them. The aim is to **keep your readers turning the pages** because they just *have* to know what happens next (even after lights out; did you do that? :-)). Even the most desperate of readers may have to break off at some point, and that's usually at a chapter break, so you want to make sure your readers **can't wait to get back into the action**.

Of course you need a gripping plot and excellent, relevant characters, but the way you set out your chapter endings could make all the difference to your novel's success. Could you end on a cliffhanger, give the plot an unexpected twist, or have a change of scene? You'll want to ring the changes, of course!

Take a look at the way you have ended the chapters. Could you improve them? Is there a way you could entice your readers to keep reading? Have you finished at lights out and everyone asleep, or with a mysterious knock on the door?

Improvement #6: Grip Your Readers from the Beginning

You may have a brilliantly written, exciting novel, but if the beginning is a bit dull, you risk

losing your readers before they get to the good bit. This is particularly true for children, who rarely persevere with a book they find boring.

So you need to grip your readers right from the beginning of your novel. Make sure your story not only has a gripping first chapter and gripping first paragraph, but a gripping first sentence, too. You're not starting your story with a bored child, are you? Better have them being led into an alien spaceship!

Does your first sentence immediately want to make us want to read on, to find out what happens? If not, how could you change it? Try several different beginnings, and see which one you like best. And read some of the current best-selling novels for the age group you are writing for, see what the authors have done. It's excellent research!

Improvement #7: Look for Stronger Words

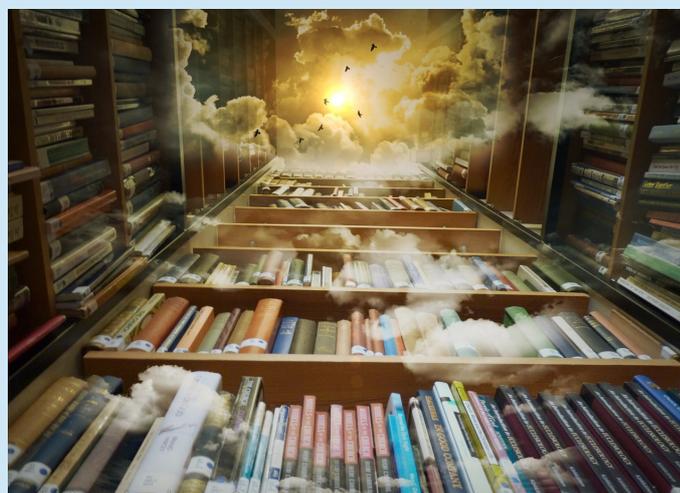
On our first draft we write as we see the action unfolding, which is great, but it's good to go back and see if you can find some stronger words to give more atmosphere.

Instead of *Peter went into the kitchen*, could he not run into it, storm into it, dash, creep, sidle, stomp, slither (well, he could be a snake!), march, tiptoe, skip or dance?

Instead of the waves reaching the shore, could they not ripple, splash, roar, thunder or explode?

The possibilities are endless – use a thesaurus if you're stuck for ideas. No need to go overboard and change every simple word (sometimes the simple ones are the best), but see how you can improve your story with some fabulous words to make your writing more descriptive, add interest, atmosphere and pace.

Go on, get your manuscript out, and see what you can do!



Improvement #8: Passive Versus Active

The difference between the passive and the active voice, is if your characters (or objects) are **doing the action themselves** (active), or if something is **being done to them** (passive).

Here are some examples:

The door was broken down in their haste to get in (passive).

They broke the door down in their haste to get in (active).

Their bags were stacked up by the door (passive).

The porter stacked their bags up by the door (active).

The baby was being carried by his mother (passive).

The mother was carrying her baby (active).



So which is better? *I think we can agree that the active voice is better.* It brings more immediacy, is less vague, and we see the action taking place for ourselves. **Three big ticks!**

So don't let things happen to your characters – let your characters get stuck right into the action themselves.

Maybe you could take a look through your work in progress/latest manuscript and see if you've used the passive tense when you could use the active? Changing things around might take a bit of thought, but it will be worth the effort. Go on, get as much action into your story as you can!

Improvement #9: Naming Your Characters

Do your characters have names that are:

- suitable for the time and place
- express their character
- different enough to distinguish them from other characters?

Let's go through these one by one. Firstly, do you have names that are suitable for the time and place in which your story is set? For example, if your story is set in the 1960s in England, Susan, Roger, Christine and Kevin might be good names. If you are writing in a more contemporary setting, you might prefer Madison, Courtney, Harry and Isaac.

Secondly, do your characters' names express their personality/background? If they do, it will be easier for your readers to create a picture of them in their minds as they read. Anastasia Buckingham-Smythe will conjure up a different picture to Betty Baker.

Thirdly, make sure your names are easily distinguishable from each other. You don't want a Mercy and a Mary, a Becky and a Chloe, a Mark and a Matt. You don't want to confuse your readers! Different initial letters and number of syllables will also help readers to easily identify one character from another. For example if one sister is called Rose, call the other one Grizelda. OK, I'm exaggerating, but you get the picture!



Improvement #10: Cut Out Unnecessary Characters

There is a temptation, I have found, for writers to add in more characters than they need.

If you have a lot of characters, you will need to use a lot of words to tell us all about them and how they come into the story. This can *slow the story down* and make the plot cumbersome.

If, for example, your protagonist has a best friend, and each have several siblings, you could easily end up with eight or ten characters. Readers may quickly become confused, forgetting who is who and which sibling belongs to which family.

If you can keep the number of characters in your story down, it will make your writing less complicated and keep the action going at a good pace. There's nothing wrong with a one-child family, if siblings aren't part of the plot!

Plus, if you only have one or two main characters, you will have space for readers to get to know them really well, to get right into their hearts, their minds, their emotions. This will help us to truly engage with them and care about what happens to them. Always a good thing!

Are there any superfluous characters in your story you could cut out?

So there you have it – if you put these ten tips into practice, you will instantly improve your manuscript! We go into many of these areas in much more detail in the [Write for a Reason course](#) and the [Membership Programme](#). If you can see how, with a bit of help, you could transform your story, **please don't hesitate to join us!** If you join the [Membership Programme](#), you will receive training on one aspect of writing Christian fiction for children and young adults every month – it's great fun! Exercises are included, so you have to knuckle down and do some work . . . but best of all, you can put the teaching into practice straight away. :-) [Click here to take a look](#). You can also do the [Write for a Reason course](#), but if you would like to get to know us a bit better first, that's totally understandable. :-)



Will be in touch again soon,

Janet

P.S. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me through the contact form on the [Write for a Reason](#) website, or via email.