

## Writing Rules

Recently, I asked other middle-grade authors to give me a rule they use in their own writing. Here's what they said:

"Make believe should make sense -- give your magic rules."

~**Linda Joy Singleton**, author of many books for children and young adults, including the *Strange Encounters* series:

*Oh, no! UFO* (Llewellyn Publications)

*Shamrocked* (Llewellyn Publications)

*Sea Switch* (Llewellyn Publications)

[www.LindaJoySingleton.com](http://www.LindaJoySingleton.com)

"A bumpy road keeps you awake" (have conflict and obstacles in the plot).

~**Sherry Garland**, author of many books for children and young adults, including:

*The Silent Storm* (Harcourt)

*A Line in the Sand* (Scholastic Dear America series)

*The Buffalo Soldier* (Pelican Publishing)

[www.sherrygarland.com](http://www.sherrygarland.com)

"Write your first draft full-out, and then toss it away. It gives you a chance to get to know the characters, setting, and story without worrying about making everything just right. Your second first draft will be better for it."

~**Cynthia Leitich Smith**, author of books for children and young adults, including:

*Jingle Dancer* (Morrow/HarperCollins)

*Indian Shoes* (HarperCollins)

*Santa Knows* (Dutton)

[www.cynthialeitichsmith.com](http://www.cynthialeitichsmith.com)

"Read your story out loud to yourself, and you'll hear what rings true."

~**Amy Butler**, author of books for children and adults, including:

*Virginia Bound* (Clarion)

[www.amybutler.com](http://www.amybutler.com)

"Write what you like to read."

~**Greg Leitich Smith**, author of middle-grade novels, including:

*Ninjas, Piranhas, and Galileo* (Little Brown)

*Tofu and T. rex* (Little Brown)

*Santa Knows* (Dutton)

[www.gregleitichsmith.com](http://www.gregleitichsmith.com)

"You learn how to write by writing. You learn how to write better by revising."

~**Susan Taylor Brown**, author of many books for children, including:

*Robert Smalls Sails to Freedom* (Millbrook)

*Oliver's Must-do List* (Boyd's Mills Press)

*Hugging the Rock* (Tricycle Press, forthcoming)

[www.susantaylorbrown.com](http://www.susantaylorbrown.com)

"Before you start writing, get to know your character. Find out what he wants most in the world and what he's willing to do to get it, what he's most afraid of and how he acts under pressure. When a character has to face the thing he's most afraid of in order to get the thing he wants most, you've got a story."

~**L.D. Harkrader**, middle-grade author

*Airball: My Life in Briefs* (Roaring Brook Press)

[www.ldharkrader.com](http://www.ldharkrader.com)

"Exploring a detour isn't the same as being lost."

~**Cynthia Lord**, middle-grade author

*Rules* (Scholastic Press)

[www.cynthialord.com](http://www.cynthialord.com)

"Break some rules! Write poetry."

~**Mary Atkinson**, children's poet

*SCBWI Magazine Merit Award Winner for Children's Poetry*

[www.maryatkinson.net](http://www.maryatkinson.net)

"Let your characters and story surprise you. When you surprise yourself as you write, you'll surprise your readers as they read and they'll thank you for it."

~**Kathryn Lay**, middle-grade author  
*Crown Me!* (Holiday House)  
[www.kathrynlay.com](http://www.kathrynlay.com)

"Go deep. Be honest. Enjoy yourself!"

~**Amy Timberlake**, author of picture books and novels for children, including:  
*That Girl Lucy Moon* (Hyperion Books, forthcoming)  
*The Dirty Cowboy* (FSG)  
[amy@amytimberlake.com](mailto:amy@amytimberlake.com)  
([www.amytimberlake.com](http://www.amytimberlake.com) is under construction)

"Let it be bad. In other words, today the writing can be bad. In fact, let's just say it is bad - awful in fact. Trite, corny, ditch digging writing. But I'm going to show up and write the words anyway, and tomorrow, I'll make those words better."

~**Kerry Madden**, author of fiction and nonfiction for children, including:  
*Gentle's Holler* (Viking)  
*Offsides* (William Morrow & Company)  
*Writing Smarts: A Girl's Guide to Writing Great Stories, Poetry, School Reports, and More!* (American Girl)  
[www.kerrymadden.com](http://www.kerrymadden.com)

"Don't be afraid to start a story, but don't be afraid to finish it, either. Whatever is keeping you from getting to the end—fear, boredom, confusion—push through it. You never really know what a story is about until you reach the end."

~**Jacqueline Davies**, author of fiction and nonfiction for children, including:  
*Where the Ground Meets the Sky* (Marshall Cavendish)  
*The Boy Who Drew Birds: A Story of John James Audubon* (Houghton Mifflin)  
*The Night is Singing* (Dial)  
[www.jacquelinedavies.net](http://www.jacquelinedavies.net)

"Fiction may come from the author's imagination, but it's often more truthful than real life. When writing, ask yourself, 'Is it true yet?'"

~**Jennifer Richard Jacobson**, author of books for children and young adults, including:  
*Andy Shane and the Very Bossy Dolores Starbuckle* (Candlewick Press)  
*Winnie at Her Best* (Houghton Mifflin)  
*Truly Winnie* (Houghton Mifflin)  
[www.jenniferjacobson.com](http://www.jenniferjacobson.com)

"Don't save your favorite sentences. Use up your ideas for wonderful characters and stirring plots and guess what? More will roll in and fill up your mind again."

~**Jeannine Atkins**, author of fiction and nonfiction for children, including:  
*How High Can We Climb? The Story of Women Explorers* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)  
*Becoming Little Women: Louisa May at Fruitlands* (Putnam)  
*Girls Who Looked Under Rocks* (Dawn)  
[www.JeannineAtkins.com](http://www.JeannineAtkins.com)

"Make sure to name your characters so that none of the names start with the same letter. Having a "Nina" and a "Nancy" can confuse readers. And don't name a character Fred. You'll find yourself writing "Fred said" all too often!"

~**Lea Wait**, author of novels for children and adults, including:  
*Wintering Well* (Margaret K. McElderry)  
*Seaward Born* (Margaret K. McElderry)  
*Stopping to Home* (Margaret K. McElderry)  
[www.leawait.com](http://www.leawait.com)

"Believe it or not, revising is FUN! It's like you have the bare bones of a story and then you get to dress it up in a funky outfit with fabulous accessories and to-die-for shoes."

~**Sarah Darer Littman**, middle-grade author  
*Confessions of a Closet Catholic* (Dutton Children's Books)  
[www.sarahdarerlittman.com](http://www.sarahdarerlittman.com)

"If you want to get the story right, it's never too late, no matter how much you've written, to take another look with clearer eyes and start all over again. This is a good Rule for Real Life, too."

~**Howard J. Fingerhut**, as told to **Esther Hershenhorn**, author of picture books and middle-grade novels, including:

*The Confession and Secret of Howard J. Fingerhut* (Holiday House)

*Fancy That* (Holiday House)

*Chicken Soup by Heart* (Simon & Schuster)

[www.estherhershenhorn.com](http://www.estherhershenhorn.com)

"Rule 1: Read. Then repeat frequently. Nothing teaches you more about creating plot, writing dialogue, and creating dynamic characters than the act of reading."

~**Jessica Lee Anderson**, middle-grade author

*Trudy* (Milkweed Editions)

[www.jessicaleeanderson.com](http://www.jessicaleeanderson.com)

"Writing 'what you know' (as writing teachers will often tell you to do) doesn't mean writing everyday stuff. It means writing what you know to be emotionally true."

~**Emily Jenkins**, author of fiction for children and adults

*Toys Go Out* (Random/Schwartz & Wade)

*Five Creatures* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)

*That New Animal* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)

[www.emilyjenkins.com](http://www.emilyjenkins.com)