



# Revision Strategies for Picture Books

compiled by L. M. Quraishi  
<http://www.lmquraishi.com>

## **Wander.**

Get in touch with your intuition about the character and stories. –[Meg Miller](#),  
[ReViMo 2015](#)

## **Sketch.**

Even if you are a writer and not an illustrator, make stick figure drawings of each scene of your story. What are the essentials? Where is the energy and movement? What is the tone and emotion of each scene? –H. Joseph Hopkins, [Meg Miller's ReViMo 2015](#)

**Go for a walk.** [Amanda Jaros](#) wrote in her January/February 2015 [SCBWI Bulletin article](#) about a recent Stanford study, showing that participants displayed more creativity and divergent thinking when walking than when sitting still. These effects persisted even with BBIC (Butt Back in Chair). Stuck? Get out for a walk. Worried about frostbite? A treadmill will still do the trick.

**Story arc:** What are the critical events in the story arc? Can you identify them? Are they in the right order? Can you eliminate some of the weaker or nonessential events? Is there a missing event? [Joe Berger](#) reminds us to consider the space between the set-up and the punchline. Look for this at page turns and also over the entire story arc. Your story ending should hold surprise and revelation for the reader, but everything in your story should build to that inevitable end.

**Change:** What changes in your story? Is it an internal or external change? Is the change big and satisfying (even the quiet changes)? What change have you offered your readers?

**Stakes:** What is your main character's goal? What is your main character's need? Do the need and goal coincide or conflict? What happens if your character fails?

**Tension:** What could make life even more difficult for your character? An internal conflict? An external one?

**Humor:** What are the opportunities for humor in your manuscript? Where do you or your readers laugh out loud? If your manuscript is serious, where/how can you vary the tone?

**Character:** Everything that happens, every action taken, every word spoken, every detail described...all of this should emerge directly from your characters. What about your characters causes them to look like, say and do the things they do in your manuscript? If anything reads like something that any character could say or do, tighten it up! Get into YOUR character. What must happen because your character is on the page here?

**Age:** Do your characters and problems resonate for their ages and for your intended audience?

**Make a [book dummy](#).**

Lay out your text in a standard 32-page picture book format. Does it fit? Do events happen in the right places? How do the page turns work? Even if you are not an illustrator, begin to imagine possible illustrations and how the text can support/evoke them.

**Page turns:** Go through your manuscript and add page turns where you think they fit. Can you identify natural places for page turns in your manuscript? Are there places where page turns could add tension, humor or better pacing to your story? Look at balance of text per page and balance of action as well as visual progression.

**Read your manuscript out loud.**

Make sure you have a pen in your hand. Having an audience is even better.

**Scribble.**

Print up a copy of your manuscript (or use the coded feedback copy described above). Read it through with pen in hand, making changes the old-fashioned way.

**Tell your story from memory.**

Here's a tip from [Nadya Sustache](#) (*Your Book, Storytold, Jan/Feb SCBWI Bulletin*): put down your pages. Tell your story campfire-style, preferably to an audience. You'll quickly see what's missing, and maybe even discover new dimensions to your characters and new directions for your plot.

**Collect feedback.**

Ask a writing partner or critique group for feedback. Try [KidLit411 Manuscript Swap](#) if you don't have a critique group. Join [SCBWI](#) to find local, in-person critique groups, or [Julie Hedlund's 12 x 12 Picture Book Challenge](#) to find online partners. I send a hard copy of my manuscript via snail mail to a small group of beta readers, along with a self-addressed, stamped envelope, a tea bag and a bar of chocolate. In this era of limited feedback from editors and agents during the submission process,

it can be remarkably gratifying to open a manila envelope from a writing friend and find inside your manuscript with handwritten notes.

### **Collate your feedback.**

Once you have feedback from at least three other kidlit writers, code their feedback onto one printed manuscript. Indicate places everyone got excited or confused (I underline with straight lines for the good stuff and zigzags for questions/confusions, and put checks in the margin to indicate the number of people in agreement). Transcribe questions and comments onto the manuscript. Collating all your feedback can help you make sense of the feedback you're getting. Where do all your readers agree? Where do they differ? What feedback resonates with you? Where do your readers' questions lead you?

**Word count:** Cut your word count by 50%. Remember [Mac Barnett's](#) advice: a good picture book manuscript doesn't make sense without the illustrations. What can you leave to the artist?

**Word choice:** Examine each word in the manuscript, especially nouns and verbs, because as [Rebecca Janni](#) reminds us in [ReViMo 2015](#): Every. Word. Matters. Use specific nouns (jelly beans, spinach, suspenders, stripes) and vivid verbs (skipped, slumped, slithered) to clarify character and brighten the action. But be sure to anchor the descriptive language with occasional simple, straightforward words (friend, smile, home). This varies the rhythm and tone of your writing in a restful way. Put every word on trial ([Emma Walton Hamilton](#)).

**Poetry:** The master of poetry in picture books, [Renee LaTulippe](#) ([ReViMo 2015](#)), urges us to read our manuscripts out loud and look for places to add lyrical prose. Her website offers rich resources for the study of [poetic techniques](#).

**Line edit:** Get rid of repetition, unnecessary modifiers, unnecessary description, telling, heavy dialogue tags, inconsistent tense, boring words, overused words, etc.

### **Be active!**

Eliminate or replace all forms of the helping verb "to be." Watch out for: *be, am, are, is, was, were, been.* –[Sudipta Bardhan-Quallen](#), [ReViMo 2015](#)

**Read it aloud!** Have someone read it aloud to you 10 times in a row.

**Keep a Project Log:** [Kara LaReau](#) shares how an essential part of [her revision practice](#) involves writing in her journal at the end of her work day. This helps her work out the kinks and sometimes even discover new solutions.

**Write a pitch:** Can you distill the manuscript into a single, compelling sentence?

**Rest:** Put it aside and work on something else.