

# HOW TO PILOT AND BETA-TEST A CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOK

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# WRITE THE BOOK!



Have an idea for a picture book and want to research whether it's marketable and what others think? The first step to piloting a book is to write it. Juliet Jenson, author of the For a Day series, says that the first draft is going to be terrible. Often, we can get stuck by trying to write the book perfectly the first time. However, as Linda Nathan, author of over 5 books, says, "If you never write it, then no one else will. It is your story to tell."

*"I think it's about discipline. There's no magic formula. Just do it. Sit down and make yourself do the work. Get the words out. And if you do that, then eventually they come. It is that simple."*  
-Mikaela Benson

Lester Laminack, author of over 25 books for teachers and children, says that his editor is crucial in the writing process. Feedback is essential to the craft of writing. So, write, rewrite, revise, edit, and get it done.



This booklet encapsulates my findings from piloting and beta testing a picture book through my studies at Harvard Graduate School of Education. I also include quotes from author interviews that I conducted throughout the process. Best of luck in testing out your book!

# LEARN ABOUT THE MARKET

Before piloting a book, it is important to learn about the children's literature market. Ray Coutu, editor-in-chief at Scholastic, says there are many ways to publish a great variety of books. It is important to know who you are writing for and what you are writing about. Here are a few tips for learning about the Children's Picture Book Market:

- Join the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCWI).
  - Offers "how to" guides and writing events as well as ways to connect with other writers, publishers, and editors.
- Attend library and bookstore events.
  - Often libraries and bookstores will have "meet the author" events. Observe and ask the writer some questions about their process if there is an opportunity.
- Join Children's Picture Book Social Media Groups.
- Join the Institute of Children's Literature Free Newsletter.
  - This offers writing advice and "hot markets" for submissions.
- Listen to author, publisher, and editor podcasts.
- Join a writer's group.
- Attend Writer's Workshops.
- Attend Writer's Conferences.
- Join [12X12challenge.com](http://12X12challenge.com) for a picture book author support group.

*"Writing is a process that reveals what is in your mind. We often think we have to have it all planned out but we don't. **We learn through the process.** So keep writing!"*

*-Tanushree Luthra*

# LITERATURE REVIEW

Read, Read, and Read Some More



*"EVERYTHING GOING ON  
AROUND YOU CAN BE AN  
INSPIRATION TO INTEGRATE  
INTO YOUR STORY."*

*-TANYA WRIGHT*

Part of your market research should include a literature review. You will need to find and read other books that would compare to yours. We call these "comps." Are there a lot of books similar to yours? If so, does yours add to the literature? Are there only a few books similar to yours? If the answer is yes, then does that mean there isn't a market for this type of book? Or does it mean that your book is needed? Another benefit to finding similar books is that you can check the publisher or agent of the author of the book. This will give you an idea of where you can submit your book.

Here are a few ways to find out about where your book fits into the literature:

- Head over to the library and ask the librarians to help you find books with similar themes to yours.
- Search book lists on the internet that have a similar theme.
- Talk to teachers, parents, and children about books that are similar to yours.
- Check out Amazon or other bookseller sites to see what are top sellers.

# THE PILOT TEST

Piloting a children's picture book is when you, the author, read the book to an audience and ask questions to receive feedback about the book.

## 1. FIND AN AUDIENCE

There are a few ways to find an audience to listen to you read your book. One way is to ask your local elementary schools if you could read your book to a classroom. (Keep in mind, you may need to have a background check to go into schools.) Another is to talk to librarians, bookstore owners, or farmer's markets. Find your audience by asking: who is my target audience, and what audiences are available to me?

## 2. GUIDING STEPS

- Figure out the way you want to share your book to a large audience. Create a slide deck on a Smartboard, create poster-size printed pages, or print out a copy of your book that can be shared.
- Pick 3-4 questions you want to ask. Choose when to ask them during your book.
- Make blank forms with your questions and have people listening write down their thoughts.
- Record the read-aloud if possible (make sure your audience knows and you do not collect identifying information).
- Think through logistics: Where will people sit? What materials do you need? Where will you collect pencils and paper? How much time do you need?

## 3. PROS AND CONS

Pros:

- You can get a lot of feedback in a short amount of time.
- You can gather both written and oral feedback.
- Audiences love being included in giving feedback on your book.

Cons:

- Finding an audience can be tricky.
- Note, this is not the best method for getting early reviews for your book.
- One audience may not be representative of your entire potential readers..

# THE BETA TEST

Beta-testing a children's picture book is when you, the author, send the book out to others to beta-read your book and give you feedback. The author is not present at the reading.

## 1. FIND AN AUDIENCE

You may already have a following; if so, many authors and publishers send out beta-readers so that they can get early reviews for their book. If that is the purpose, then this may be the best way to go. You may have friends or family members who also could be interested in giving you feedback. There are also bloggers and Instagrammers that will sometimes review your book for free or for a fee.

## 2. GUIDING STEPS

- You can share your book in print form, as an ebook, or a pdf. However, keep in mind your audience and what would work best with them.
- What kind of feedback are you looking for? Be clear with what you are looking for in your questions. Are you looking for feedback or reviews?
- You can create a survey to get information; however, keep in mind that families are busy and you may have a low response rate.
- One idea is that you can have an incentive for them filling out the survey or filling out a review for your book. For example, they get a prize for completion, free downloadable content related to your book, entered into a drawing, or add a name for one of your characters to vote on.

## 3. PROS AND CONS

Pros:

- Great way to get individual feedback on your book.
- You can tap into your audience by having a beta-test. This could be exciting for readers.
- Great way to get reviews pre-publication.

Cons:

- Families are busy and so might not have time.
- It may be challenging to find an audience.
- If you print individual books, it can be costly.

# PILOT & BETA TEST QUESTIONS



When thinking about questions, it is important to think about the age and interests of your audience. The younger your audience, the fewer questions you will likely be able to ask. I wanted to find out what my pilot and beta readers thought would happen in my book, to see if they picked up on any lessons and themes and to get their overall input on illustrations and the writing.

Sample Questions:

1. What do you like in a picture book?
2. What do you predict will happen next?
3. What are some lessons that the main character is learning from the book?
4. Do you agree with the decision the main character made? Why or why not?
5. What do you like about the illustrations/writing?
6. What could be improved with the illustrations/writing?



# DECIDING BETWEEN PILOT AND BETA TESTING



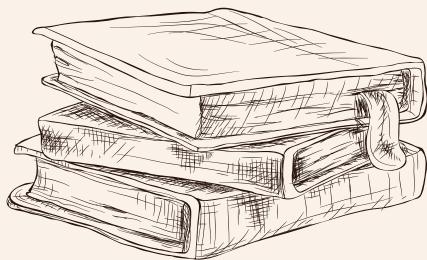
What is your goal for getting feedback for your book? Are you trying to get feedback to improve your book? Are you trying to find if your book has an audience or market? Or is this a good way to start marketing your book?

Ultimately, you will need to decide to either pilot, beta test, or do both with your book. You can base your decision on your audience, your goals, and what resources are available to you. As I piloted and beta tested my picture book, I found that the pilot process was more efficient and more useful than beta-testing because I received a lot of feedback in a short amount of time. However, I can imagine that in the future I might try beta-testing again, especially if I want to drum up support for my book.

One final note, always make sure to include that the readers will not share your pre-published book.

*"It's fun to tell a story! You have the ability to manipulate the world and the characters to tell whatever story you want. It's a powerful, heady, and addicting feeling."*

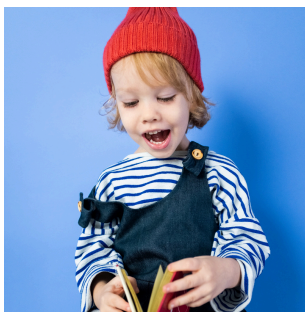
*-Megan Nordquist*



# ANALYZE, EVALUATE, AND APPLY

*“Feedback and collaboration are a central part of success to taking things to the next level.”*

*-Rachel Rueckert*



## Analyze

Sort your feedback so you can understand it.

- Organize the information you have collected either in a spreadsheet or on your floor.
- Sort them into categories of responses.
- Take time to look at any trends you notice about the responses to your book.



## Evaluate

How does this information help you?

- What information stands out?
- What did you learn that you did not know before?
- What are the major feedback trends?



## Apply

Put the feedback to use.

- How can you use the information to make your book better?
- How much interest was shown in your book and is it a viable product?
- What are the next steps for your book?

# WANT TO TEST YOUR BOOK OUT?

Piloting and Beta-testing a children's picture book is a process worth undertaking if you want to:

1. Receive feedback from your target audience to improve your book.
2. Learn if you have a marketable and viable book.
3. Get early reviews for your pre-published book.

This booklet gives a brief how-to guide for how to write a book, apply market research, conduct a literature review, pilot and/or beta-test your book, and questions to ask at the end of the process.



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