

Advice for Young Writers

Here's some of the advice I often give to young writers. First of all, they need to READ as much as they can. Every time a young person reads a book, he or she learns new words, and words are the building blocks of our stories. Knowing what words mean and building a rich palette of words they can use (I'm consciously changing metaphors here :) helps young writers add depth and texture to their work. Reading also exposes young people to fundamental aspects of writing, including plot structure, characterization, and setting.

Secondly, I urge young people to WRITE as much as they can. They can keep journals and diaries or post articles about their passions and hobbies on blogs. They can encourage their schools to start newspapers and story clubs. Young writers can also share their stories and novels through online writing sites or have their work published in magazines and journals. There are even writing camps now for teens around the country. I wrote my first novel with my best friend in fifth grade, and we had SO much fun doing it!

Young writers need to UNPLUG from all their enticing and distracting electronic gadgets like cellphones, video games, and computers to spend time DAYDREAMING each day. Daydreaming is an undervalued skill in our society, but emptying one's mind and letting one's thoughts drift is a wonderful way to practice creativity. Kids to spend time imagining every day!

I believe fan fiction can be a great way to encourage kids to write. Young writers can spin stories set in the worlds created by their favorite authors. It can be fun and excellent practice to write stories set in the wizarding world of Harry Potter, or Percy Jackson's world full of jealous gods. There's even some amazing fan fiction on Wattpad that's set in my Neptune world!

I also encourage kids to write the kind of books they like to read. There's no point in writing a vampire story if you don't like vampires. When I was young, I loved stories about shy kids who were brave and made a difference. So now, my books are often about shy kids who are way braver than they ever thought they could be, and they save entire worlds.

Finally, when young writers start pounding out their stories, they often want to tell the reader lots of backstory and TELL the reader all about their character. It's so important to SHOW us who your character is through actual dialogue and scenes where they deal with their family, friends, and challenges. Don't tell us that character is kind, stubborn, or brave. SHOW US your character being these things in real time, on the page. If you can do that, you will get much more caught up in your story, and your readers will as well.

What advice best served you when you began professionally writing fiction?

Once it sells, don't get overwhelmed by or too obsessed with promoting your novel. Thanks to the internet and the explosion of social media platforms, authors could spend 24 hours a day promoting their books. Their agents, however, would probably tell you that they would much prefer their authors spent their time writing more good books instead of spending hours and hours creating new reels and Tiktok videos.

Engaging in some form of social media is necessary these days, if only because your publisher will expect you to be active out there. It helps if you can choose one or two platforms that you actually enjoy and spend your promotional time there, reaching out and getting to know other writers, librarians, booksellers etc. Try to be truly you and as authentic as you can in your posts and comments.

I'm a big believer in formally thanking bloggers, podcasters, and teachers who host me. When I have the opportunity, I tell school administrators how terrific their librarians and teachers are. I make a point of mentoring less experienced writers every year. The publishing and writing universe can be surprisingly small, and I've been amazed by how often a kind and polite gesture on my part has paid off with great blurbs, and school visits, and conference invitations years later.

Finally, circling back to my first point, don't get so worried about promotion that you don't actually take time to **enjoy the ride**. You've finally made your lifelong dream come true, so try to give yourself a moment every day to relish and appreciate your amazing accomplishment. You are finally a professional writer!