



Author Guidelines

Creating "easy to read, hard to put down" books



The Storyshares library has grown to include decodable chapter books for students who are learning and/or reviewing foundational phonics skills. Most decodable chapter books are written for students in kindergarten through first grade. There are many older students who also struggle with decoding. They need books that reflect their interests while helping them learn those foundational skills.

Here are some tips & guidelines for creating these "just right" decodable stories.

The goal is to generate content for teen and young adult readers, but written in ways that align with specific phonics concepts. Clear, phonetic, decodable language, but content that engages and inspires older striving readers.

FORMAT & READABILITY:

- Stories could range from 1,000 to 1,200 words. Write short and well-spaced chapters that are approximately 200 words each.
- **Richness of Text:** Each page should have about 30-40 words on it. This can be specified in your submission by labeling which page goes with which words.
- **Scope and Sequence:** Each chapter should align with a specific, sequential phonics focus.
 - Chapter 1: single, closed syllable words
 - Chapter 2: single, closed syllable words and multisyllabic closed syllable words
 - Chapter 3: single, closed syllable words, multisyllabic closed syllable words, and single syllable words with the vowel-consonant-e spelling pattern
 - Chapter 4: single, closed syllable words, multisyllabic closed syllable words, single syllable words with the vowel-consonant-e spelling pattern, and multisyllabic words with closed and vowel-consonant-e syllables

- **Word Lists:** There are many word lists available online for all of these phonics concepts. We suggest using word lists to help you write a text that’s accessible to students practicing these different skills. Consider these lists of possibilities rather than requirements. The word lists are meant to be spiraled. For example, if you are writing Chapter 4, you can (and should!) use words that fit the phonics patterns for Chapters 1-3, as well. In addition to decodable words, you can use high-frequency/sight words.
- **High-Frequency & Challenge Words:** Speaking of, we understand that to tell a compelling story, you will need to use words that are not completely decodable according to the guidelines listed above. You have two additional word lists that you can use to craft these stories:
 - The Fry 300 high-frequency words (you can use any of these words)
 - You can use up to 15 “challenge words” per 200-word chapter. These challenge words do not have to be decodable.
- **The Art of Clarity:** Write sentences that are concise, concrete, and straightforward. Simple sentences are better. Divide longer sentences into shorter ones. Remove multiple clauses. Replace commas with periods.
- Avoid idioms or misleading phrases. Replace expressions and clichés with direct language. For example: instead of “She decided to bite the bullet and she picked up the phone,” try “She took a deep breath. She picked up the phone.”

Additional Tips from the Teaching and Learning Alliance:

- Step One: Choose the phonetic skill.
- Step Two: Find a word list!
- Step Three: Use high-frequency words from the Fry 300 list.
- Step Four: Write the story.

CONTENT:

- **Reader Audience:** Decide who you are writing for: a middle school student? A high school student? A 19-year-old? An adult? An English Language Learner? A student with dyslexia? Write with your reader in mind: create characters that are the same age, and develop themes and situations that would be relevant and intriguing for that reader.
- **Characters:** Feature an authentic main character who is relatable to a diverse reader audience. Make sure they are at least as old as your intended reader. Characters should encounter situations that are familiar and easy to relate to for teens and young adults, and for those who are underrepresented in modern literature, including but not limited to LGBTQIA, people with disabilities, and ethnic, racial, cultural, and religious minorities. Intriguing characters are developed through their actions, choices, and words. Create characters who make decisions that develop the plot. Give readers someone to root for. Distinguish your characters with something unique and memorable.
- **Plot:** Create challenges and themes that are complex, authentic, and relevant to your readers. While the format and language of your book should be more basic, the intrigue and plot should be compelling enough to hook teen and adult readers.

To Summarize...

We believe that with decodables, we can tell big stories with text control! These content guidelines are meant to support you in inspiring the most left-behind striving readers.



Decodables Microfiction Subcategory



Create short and impactful stories with our microfiction challenge! Challenge yourself by building a collection of enchanting stories using 250 words or less. With our “Decodable Microfiction” category, **each passage will relate to an image and be written for** middle school and high school students that focus specifically on shortness and simplicity.

These stories should center around characters and experiences that will spark teen interest, while also taking care to be told in very short sentences using the simplest words possible. Don't be intimidated, but also don't be fooled, telling a *simple story* is not an easy task! Easy reading is hard writing. You will be working with a limited writer's toolkit, but we know you will rise to the challenge.

Here are some tips & guidelines for creating these "just right" decodable stories.

FORMAT & READABILITY:

- Challenge yourself by building a collection of 5 enchanting stories using 250 words or less.
- Each microfiction story can align with a specific phonics focus. Some examples below:
 - Single, closed syllable words
 - Single, vowel-consonant-e words
 - Closed, multisyllabic words
 - Closed syllable base words with suffixes added
 - Stories that focus specifically on Latin roots, suffixes, and prefixes
- There are many word lists available online for all of these phonics concepts. We suggest using word lists to help you write a text that's accessible to students practicing these different skills. Consider these lists possibilities rather than requirements.

- We understand that to tell a compelling story, you will need to use words that are not completely decodable according to the guidelines listed above. You have two additional word lists that you can use to craft these stories:
 - The Fry 300 high-frequency words (you can use any of these words)
 - You can use up to 15 “challenge words” per microfiction passage. These challenge words do not have to be decodable.
- Write sentences that are concise, concrete, and straightforward. Simple sentences are better. Divide longer sentences into shorter ones. Remove multiple clauses. Replace commas with periods.
- Avoid idioms or misleading phrases. Replace expressions and clichés with direct language. For example: instead of “She decided to bite the bullet and she picked up the phone,” try “She took a deep breath. She picked up the phone.”

CONTENT:

- **Reader Audience:** Decide who you are writing for: a middle school student? A high school student? A 19-year-old? An adult? An English Language Learner? A student with dyslexia? Write with your reader in mind: create characters that are the same age, and develop themes and situations that would be relevant and intriguing for that reader.
- **Open Source Photos:** Each passage should be related to and inspired by an image. Please include that image in addition to sourcing information (the image must be open-source).

Characters: If you choose to feature characters in your microfiction passage, make sure they are relatable to a diverse reader audience and at least as old as your intended reader. Intriguing characters are developed through their actions, choices, and words. Create characters who make decisions that develop the plot. Give readers someone to root for. Distinguish your characters with something unique and memorable.

- **Plot:** Create challenges and themes that are complex, authentic, and relevant to your readers. While the format and language of your book should be more basic, the intrigue and plot should be compelling enough to hook teen and adult readers.

Rubric: 2024 Story of the Year Contest

Criteria for Success: Readability

Readability & Level	Length	5%	1,000 – 15,000 words *Multiple short chapters, no more than 1,500 words in length.*
	Sentence Structure	15%	Sentences are concise, concrete, straight-forward, and focused on the subject (without multiple clauses). They are catchy, but clear.
	Vocabulary	10%	Tier 1 and Tier 2 vocabulary words only <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tier 1 words (commonly used in spoken language): <i>happy, run, baby, hat</i> • Tier 2 words (used in mature language + content areas): <i>explain, complex</i> Higher level words are supported by text (context clues, repetition).
Readability & Level (Decodables)	Length	5%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Between 200-300 words for each chapter • 4-6 chapters in the book • Sentences are concise, concrete, straight-forward, and focused on the subject (without multiple clauses). They are catchy, but clear.
	Decodability	25%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 75% of the words are decodable, according to a phonics scope and sequence • The chosen phonics scope and sequence is a clear part of the submission • Each chapter has a clear phonics focus where readers practice a specific skill • High-frequency words come from the Fry 300 list (and can be counted as decodable)

Criteria for Success: Content

Creativity, Intrigue, & Relevance for Audience	Overall	5%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short chapters* and memorable characters • Sophisticated & contemporary themes, culturally relevant topics • Straightforward/familiar language and vocabulary
	Topic & Title	5%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic is relevant and engaging to intended teen / young adult audience • Title is catchy: able to draw in teen / young adult audience
	Characters	20%	The story features a relatable main character Relatable Characters: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age: Character must be same age as your intended reader (or older) • Experiences: Characters are culturally relevant to the intended audience (encounter situations and settings that resemble and represent the readers' contexts – mirroring the themes and challenges from teen/young adults' own lives). Characters are active, not passive. Readers have someone to root for and against. Characters are unique or memorable, making readers want to read on. • Non-fiction: Real events/facts/topics handled in similarly intriguing ways.

Creativity, Intrigue, & Relevance for Audience	Plot	20%	<p>Story features a strong central dilemma</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict is relatable and compelling for teens / young adults • Story sequence is easy to follow, but also engaging: clear beginning, middle, and end • Writer builds up to conflict, but “gets to the good stuff” quickly. • Resolution: loose ends tied up, or cliffhangers (for series especially). • Non-fiction: text revolves around a unifying central theme, for example: a short text about real current events; histories with a twist (e.g. unsolved mysteries); change-makers and their untold stories)
	Dialogue	5%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dialogue is used when it is natural and when it advances the story plot. • Dialogue is accessible for striving readers: It is concise, like speaking, without unnecessary words. It is clearly assigned (to the speaker) and easy to follow.
	Detail & Description	10%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall Description: Story includes powerful imagery and vivid descriptions, without being overly verbose. • Setting: Setting is clearly described. It’s reflected in (and enhanced by) images where relevant.
	Pictures & Illustrations	5%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pictures/illustrations are essential to engagement: they support the reader in building schema and picturing the setting. • Images appeal to teen & young adult audience: photographs or “cool” graphics.
	Total Score	100%	

Criteria for Success: Decodable Microfiction

For this category, we’re looking for a collection of 5 decodable passages of no more than 250 words that relate to a central theme and align with a given picture.

The Decodable Microfiction Collection will be judged using the same rubric, with the exception of the noted criteria:

- Length: Up to 250 words for each passage.
 - A completed collection will contain 5 passages and have a word count of no more than 1250 words.
 - Chapters are not expected.
- Plot: Story will be somewhat simple, but engaging and compelling nonetheless.
 - It is not required to have a clear beginning, middle, and end.
 - The 5 passages will follow a central theme.
- Pictures & Illustrations: One picture or illustration per microfiction passage.