



Main Author Guidelines

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



The Storyshares library is home to a unique collection of easy to read, hard to put down books specifically created to engage teens & adults who struggle with reading.

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

OVERALL:

- The goal is to generate content for readers who are in middle school, high school, or older, written at a first- to fifth-grade **reading level (RL)**. Content (topic, characters, plot) should be mature and intriguing for ages 10+.

FORMAT:

- Stories could range anywhere from **1,000 to 15,000 words**. Write short and well-spaced chapters and avoid long, unbroken paragraphs.
- Use **familiar words and repetitive vocabulary** to help with comprehension. Help readers deduce the meaning of more complex words by providing subtle definitions or examples within sentences, or by incorporating context clues. For example: "The soup tasted horrid. I wanted to spit it out."
- Write sentences that are concise, concrete, and straightforward. Shorter sentences are better. **Divide longer sentences into shorter ones**. Replace commas with periods. Keep it simple. 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:

- Create content that is **relatable, age-appropriate, and culturally relevant** for teens / young adults. Write short chapters and develop memorable characters. Use sophisticated themes and complex ideas, but straightforward language.

- **Reader Audience:** Decide who you are writing for: a middle school student? A high school student? A 19-year-old? An adult? 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 age group.
- **Characters:** Feature a main character who is relatable to our 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, particularly those who are underrepresented in modern literature.
 - The character's challenges, settings, and themes should be complex, authentic, and similar to those in your readers' own life. They should be culturally relevant for a range of identities and experiences, 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:** Fictional pieces feature a strong central conflict or dilemma, which is relatable and compelling for teens / young adults. The plot involves tough choices without easy solutions. The story sequence is coherent and simple to follow, but also engaging. There is a clear beginning, middle, and end.
 - Nonfiction plots feature real, authentic places and events, depicted in an engaging way. They provide readers with an accurate sense of who, what, when, where, and why.
- **Dialogue:** For fiction stories, dialogue is natural, concise, and advances the story's plot. It is easy to follow, with speakers clearly assigned.
 - In nonfiction, dialogue includes documented quotes with attributions.
- **Images:** For both fiction and nonfiction works, pictures and illustrations (if used) are relevant to the story, have a catchy / sophisticated vibe for older readers, and align with the content of the text.
 - For nonfiction, images used must accurately represent the setting, characters, and events taking place.

Additional tips for creating diverse, relatable characters

- Know your demographic(s). In order to create an authentic story with relatable characters, we recommend either writing from a perspective that you have experience with or heavily researching the perspective(s) that you will be writing from. Books (especially nonfiction) and the internet can provide a wealth of information, however, we also recommend speaking with members of the community you're writing about whenever possible. Ground-level feedback is invaluable to the authenticity of your story and characters.
- Don't just focus on stories about people facing adversity for their differences. Those stories have a lot of potential, but they can't be the only light in which diversity is shown. True diversity also means showing diverse characters and experiences in an ordinary, mundane way: for example, a teenager who happens to be in a wheelchair navigating the highs and lows of high school life just like his/her peers.
- Use factual detail and descriptions. For example: say that your character has dark, brown skin. Treat your representations with as much factuality as care. Avoid metaphors or "dancing around" in your representation. For example, avoid using food metaphors to describe skin tone: caramel, chocolate, coffee. Details erase the status of "whiteness" as default in your story.
- Infuse your characters with personality, and don't make it dependent on diversity. For example, don't assume that your character in a wheelchair will hate sports. It's possible that the idea of sports may depress your character, but it is equally possible that he/she is a prominent athlete on a special-needs team.

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.