



L281: Writing Children's Picture Books [Sample Syllabus]

Amy Eisner

Contact information

My email address is aeisner@mica.edu. Office hours: just send an email and we'll schedule a time. I expect to meet with you at least twice during the semester.

Course description

So you want to make a children's picture book? Great. This course will help you develop your text. But as we begin reading children's books (and books about children's books), writing manuscripts, and sharing them with each other and with young children, we will quickly encounter some challenging questions. What is this book for? Who is it for? Does it appeal to children and adults in different ways? What assumptions does it make about the world of childhood and the relationships children have? How does it obscure, reveal, comment on, or attempt to change the truths of life—things like love, desire, satisfaction, hurt, difference, sickness, and death? What values or norms does it establish—or subvert? Do the words and pictures reinforce one another or is there tension between them, and to what effect? What values or expectations are at stake as the story or pattern unfolds? We'll use questions like these to help drive our experiments and revisions.

Assignments include examining a variety of children's books, reading books with children, and emulating specific authors and techniques to develop original work. We will discuss both text and illustration in published picture books, but the creative assignments and workshop discussions will focus on the text component. We will also explore the interactions between word and image in your own work. Final portfolio requirements will vary depending on the path you choose (author vs. author-illustrator), but all students will conclude the semester with a set of manuscripts that are ready for illustration accompanied by an exploration of how at least one manuscript works structurally or visually (e.g., storyboard, book dummy, sample illustrations, character sketches). Note: If you are planning to work on the same material simultaneously in another course, you must sit down with me early in the semester to work out an individual program.

Course objectives

- Break down assumptions about children, storytelling, and children's literature
- Study the work of exemplary author illustrators
- Develop a sense of what you want to create and why
- Write constantly, trying out new ideas throughout the semester
- Revise, refine, and mock up the most promising ideas into a high-quality portfolio

Books

You'll need to buy Ann Whitford Paul's guidebook, *Writing Picture Books*. I also recommend having Patricia T. O'Conner's *Woe Is I: The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English*. You may wish to buy picture books for yourself as well. All other required reading will be available on reserve in Decker library or (occasionally) online. Please be prepared to spend substantial amounts of time in Decker library reading books on reserve. Do not leave the reading for the last minute! It takes longer to read and absorb a picture book than you may think, the secondary texts are dense, and I generally remove the books at noon on Thursday to use in class.

Course Requirements and Grading

1/3 Participation – generosity, exactitude, judiciousness

Read with a pencil in hand. Be alert and prepared for all discussions, workshops, and school visits. Speak out in class; we need your voice.

1/3 Assignments—quality, ambition, experimentation

There will be frequent writing assignments. I will generally suggest a direction based on the ideas we are exploring, but you will need to follow the work wherever it leads. The text is due online on the day before class. If you have a dummy book you can bring with you to class.

1/3 Portfolio—persistence, general excellence

Preparing a portfolio involves continuing to work on material that you've already handed in, and changing it substantially as you follow your vision and reflect on others' responses to your work. (To revise is to see again, so you may need to turn it inside out and upside-down and rip its little heart out.)

Attendance

If you must miss a class, please coordinate with me beforehand and follow up afterward. If you feel the absence should be excused (illness, family emergency), you must say so explicitly. If I do not say you are excused, you are not excused. If you have two or more unexcused absences, I will deduct 5 points for each from your final grade.