

WriteForKids Picture Book Critique Service with Laura Backes

Laura Backes has worked in the children's book publishing industry since 1986, as an editor, literary agent, teacher, and publisher of *Children's Book Insider* newsletter. Over the years she's critiqued thousands of manuscripts, with a special emphasis on fiction and narrative nonfiction picture books. She's now reopening her picture book critique service on a limited basis with a new format that allows for one-on-one instruction, brainstorming, and feedback with the author.

The Critique Process:

1. **Laura reads your manuscript and makes comments on the document** (using the Track Changes edit feature). These comments will primarily focus on developmental edits, such as overall story structure, character development, plot arc (catalyst, turning points, climax), themes, and whether the primary conflict is resolved at the end in a satisfying way. The critique will NOT focus on line edits except for suggestions of revisions you might make to your overall writing style (for example, if you use weak verbs padded with adverbs, Laura will give examples of how to turn those into stronger verbs that work on their own).
2. **Laura returns the manuscript to you with her inserted comments, along with some questions or points to think about related to the work.** The questions might be: What do you see as the primary theme of this story? What is your character's biggest problem or conflict, and what happens if they don't solve it? Can you identify the inciting incident that sets the plot in motion (or creates the catalyst for the plot)? How does the reader know when the conflict is solved? Who do you see as the main audience for this book? Have you done any research as to which grades focus on this topic in schools?

These are simply questions for you to reflect on before our Zoom call.

3. **You and Laura meet for an hour-long Zoom call at a scheduled time to discuss your work.** Laura will review and elaborate upon her comments, give you her analysis of the work along with revision suggestions, and brainstorm with you on changes you might make. You'll discuss the questions she sent and how the answers may influence your edits. This hour will be shaped by the needs of each client—depending on the level of experience, some writers may need instruction on picture book structure, while others can discuss voice or brainstorm ways to completely revamp the work. If the critique portion takes less than 60 minutes, you can use the remaining time to discuss anything writing or publishing related.
4. **After the Zoom meeting, Laura will create a 5 Point Action Plan specifically tailored to your manuscript and your needs as a writer.** This plan will give you direction as you begin the revision process. She'll send you the Action Plan along with the recording and the transcript of the Zoom meeting for you to review as many times as you'd like.

See the following pages for the critique cost, scheduling process, and frequently asked questions.

Critique Pricing:

For fiction and narrative nonfiction picture book manuscripts up to 1000 words, the cost for the full critique package as described on the previous page is **\$250, payable upon scheduling the critique.**

If you'd like Laura to review additional back matter that accompanies your text (up to 3 double-spaced pages), it's an **additional \$25, payable upon scheduling the critique.**

If you'd like Laura to review a dummy along with your manuscript (includes 2-4 finished illustrations with the rest of the pages sketched out, text placed on each page), it's an **additional \$40, payable upon scheduling the critique.** (Note: Dummies will be critiqued on overall layout and marketability of illustration style. Laura cannot give advice on illustration technique.)

Manuscripts longer than 1000 words (excluding back matter) will be charged an additional fee, depending on complete word count. To really get the most out of this critique, it's advised that you tighten the manuscript to 1000 words or less before scheduling. The current industry standard is under 800 words for fiction, and up to 1000 words for narrative nonfiction (though shorter is better).

How to Schedule a Critique:

1. Email Laura at Laura@WriteForKids.org with "Request for Critique" in the subject line. Please provide the word count of your manuscript and if you're adding on either the back matter or dummy critique (or both).
2. Laura will send you a link to the online Zoom schedule form. Critique slots are offered on most Thursday afternoons and evenings. If all slots are full, you can request to be placed on a waiting list for any cancellations. When Laura extends the schedule every few months, anyone still on the waiting list will get priority scheduling.
3. Once your Zoom meeting is booked, Laura will send you a PayPal invoice for the full price of the critique. The invoice allows you to use your PayPal account, or pay with any credit or debit card. **The fee must be paid in full within 3 business days of receipt of the invoice.** Failure to pay within 3 business days will result in your Zoom meeting being canceled and given to the next person on the waiting list.
4. You'll email your manuscript to Laura@WriteForKids.org **at least one week prior to your scheduled critique.** Laura will return your manuscript with her comments and discussion questions at least 48 hours before your scheduled meeting.

Please include a brief paragraph about yourself in the body of the email that includes how much writing experience you have, and whether you've published. Any information about why you are writing this manuscript is welcome. Attach your materials in the following formats:

All manuscripts and back matter should be in standard submission format (double-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman or similar font, indent at the beginning of each paragraph), and sent as **Word documents (.doc)** attached to your email. If you are adding back matter for an additional \$25, it can be pasted at the end of the manuscript, or sent as a separate document.

Book dummies should be in **PDF format**, attached to your email.

Here are answers to some common questions:

1. Does Laura send a full, written critique letter along with comments on the manuscript, the discussion questions, the Zoom recording, and the 5 Point Action Plan?

No, because the core of the critique process, the live Zoom meeting, needs to be free to evolve with the needs of the client, and allow an open discussion about the work. Laura will explain her revision suggestions in detail on the call (and the manuscript itself will have electronic comments that relate to those suggestions), but what happens next needs to be open-ended. Sometimes the client agrees with the changes and the time can be spent brainstorming other directions for the work. Other times the client needs more foundational knowledge on picture book structure before the revisions can be fully understood and executed. A written critique letter limits these options. Great ideas will emerge, that's a guarantee! And the call transcript and recording will allow you to review all those ideas at your own pace.

2. Why is a short manuscript priced the same as a 1000-word manuscript?

It may take a few more minutes to read the 1000-word manuscript, but the time analyzing the work, formulating comments and questions, and creating an action plan for the author is the same as with a shorter work. Shorter manuscripts may even take longer to critique, because understanding what's missing from the story can be just as challenging as seeing what needs to be cut.

3. What if Thursdays don't work for my schedule? Can you offer me a different day?

At this time, Thursdays are the only free days in Laura's calendar. However, if you want to get on the waiting list, email Laura@WriteForKids.org and specify the weekdays that work for you. If some time opens up she may be able to work you in. And if she gets enough requests for a different day, she can add that day to the 2025 schedule.