How to Revise a Picture Book: Beginnings and Endings

By Karen Krossing

I firmly believe that revision is the heart of the writer's craft. We hear from Anne Lamott in *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* that we need to give ourselves permission to write a "shitty first draft". Author Jane Smiley said, "Every first draft is perfect, because all a first draft has to do is exist." If the purpose of a first draft is just to get our ideas down on paper in a somewhat-coherent manner, revision becomes paramount. It's the reason an editor might eventually be able to sense the pulse of my story. It's the reason a reader might get to thrum to the beating heart of the story I've finally managed to infuse with life.

But how to revise well? I explored this question with a visit to my local archive—the Osborne Collection of Early Children's Books in Toronto—to seek original manuscripts that became acclaimed picture books. My goal was to analyze how authors of both classic and recent books had revised their manuscripts. I thought of it as a game, where I could identify what questions the author may have asked when revising or what questions they answered through revision. I could then ask the same questions about my own works-in-progress. I emerged from the stacks with seven picture-book manuscripts by authors who were not illustrators, since I'm not one.

Then I analyzed three of those manuscripts, including one for the concept book *Red is Best* by Kathy Stinson (illustrated by Robin Baird Lewis, published by Annick Press), about a girl who insists red is the best colour; the narrative nonfiction book *The Road to Afghanistan* by Linda Granfield (illustrated by Brian Deines, published by Scholastic Canada), about the memories of a young soldier who has returned from duty; and the classic story *Franklin in the Dark* by Paulette Bourgeois (illustrated by Brenda Clark, published by Kids Can Press), about a turtle who is afraid of the darkness inside his own shell.

First, some statistics and generalities about what I discovered: *Red is Best* gained fifty words during revision to a total of 338 while the others became significantly shorter. All authors revised the title—one to echo a change to the ending (*My Favourite Colour is Red* becomes *Red is Best*), one to echo a change in the story problem (*The Turtle They Called Chicken* becomes *Franklin in the Dark*) and one for emphasis (*A Road to Afghanistan* becomes *The Road to Afghanistan*).

All authors made significant changes to the beginnings of their stories, and only one made no changes to the ending (Bourgeois). As for the messy middle, let's just say revisions were plentiful in all manuscripts. I noted deepening of character motivation as well as cutting, rewriting and reordering for a better emotional and/or structural through-line.

I also noticed that, in two cases, the final book answered a different story question than the draft did. In *Writing Picture Books: A Hands-On Guide from Story Creation to Publication*, Ann Whitford Paul says it's critical that each picture book answers a story question, which may be focused in many different ways, in order to provide a frame that "determines everything—plot, characters, ending, word usage."

To narrow the scope of this article, I've highlighted what I think are the most useful examples of revision techniques from the above manuscripts and books, and I've included some take-away questions for improving one's own revision process. This article will cover how to revise

beginnings and endings, and a follow-up article will explore how to revise messy middles.

A STRONG PICTURE-BOOK BEGINNING NEEDS to cover a lot of ground: introduce an engaging protagonist, define what he or she wants, evoke the setting, launch the conflict, establish tone and voice, and compel a child and even an adult reader to turn the page. In her early draft of *Red is Best,* Stinson includes the mother's dialogue near the beginning of her text:

"Kelly, here are your white stockings. Come and put them on, please."
(Kelly in just her dress, mom holding out white stockings.)
"But I want to wear my red stockings!"

"A picture-book ending is, ideally, a destination that is both inevitable and surprising."

By the final version, Stinson has cut this text in favour of focussing on the child's point of view: "My mom doesn't understand about red." In this sentence, she introduces the opinionated voice of the protagonist, her conflict with mom and the colour concept that is the through-line of the book. She evokes compelling questions like: What is so special about red? Why doesn't mom understand? Who will win this conflict?

Similarly, for *The Road to Afghanistan,* Granfield cut over a hundred words from her draft opening. Told in the voice of a young soldier, Granfield's draft manuscript begins with the protagonist's childhood reflections on never correctly spelling Afghanistan in school, not knowing where it was or who lived there, and not knowing what an afghan blanket and an Afghan dog had to do with the country.

In her final version, Granfield cut this text to begin with her young soldier as an adult, saying:

"Afghanistan. I've been there and seen the beauty of its mountains and its fields of wildflowers. I've also seen the ugliness that war can bring to a country and to its people. I was a soldier there for two tours of duty, but now I'm home."

In her draft, Granfield was working in a child-like connection, since writing an adult protagonist in a picture book is a challenge, but the final text is stronger with its focused conflict up front.

Since picture books have word-count restrictions, it's better to get to the conflict as soon as possible. Granfield's final version establishes the soldier's reflective voice (without revealing gender), evokes the setting of Afghanistan and sets up a conflict between beauty and ugliness. The reader is left curious about what this soldier experienced and who he or she is.

In contrast, Bourgeois does not cut text from her draft beginning of *Franklin in the Dark*. Instead, she rewrites it completely. She begins her draft with a list of Franklin's fears, while the final version focuses on what he is capable of, with one pointed fear.

The draft reads: "Franklin was afraid of creepy, crawly things, slippery, slimy things, monsters (dead and alive) and very high mountain ledges. Most of all he was afraid of small, dark places. And that was the real problem because… Franklin was a turtle. He was terrified of crawling into his small, dark shell. He was the only turtle in the whole world who dragged his shell behind him in a wagon."

In contrast, the final text reads: "Franklin could slide down a riverbank all by himself. He could count forwards and backwards. He could even zip zippers and button buttons. But Franklin was afraid of small dark, places and that was a problem because… Franklin was a turtle. He was afraid of crawling into his small, dark shell. And so, Franklin the turtle dragged his shell behind him."

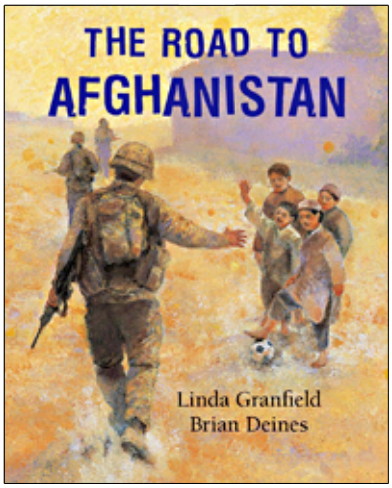
The final text does a much better job of establishing Franklin's age and ability level. He's more appealing since he's not a complete scaredy-turtle. Instead, he's generally happy with only one big problem, which sets up a delightful contrast. The

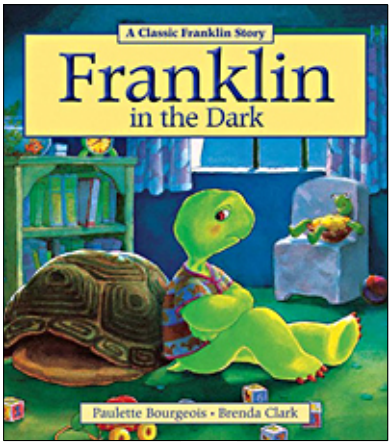
reader laughs at the image of a turtle pulling his shell behind him, but also empathizes since we're all afraid of something.

After the opening, the reader is left wondering how Franklin will solve his problem. In both versions, Bourgeois retains the great illustration opportunity of Franklin pulling his shell behind him. In other words, it's as important to know what to cut (or rewrite) as it is to know what to keep.

From my analysis of these revised beginnings, I developed these questions to ask when revising our own picture-book manuscripts:

- From Stinson's revision: *Have I started with a child-centred point of view? With a strong, compelling character? With a clear protagonist's desire line?*
- From Granfield's revision: *Have I started with conflict on the first page? With a compelling setting and strong mood?*
- From Bourgeois's revision: *Can I revise my beginning for character depth and clarity? Do I need to focus or shift my story problem?*





Since the destination is useful to keep in mind when revising, I'll skip over messy middles to look at endings next. A picture-book ending is, ideally, a destination that is both inevitable and surprising. Author Jane Yolen says, "A book should end with the unexpected expected." In *The Nuts and Bolts Guide to Writing Picture Books*, author Linda Ashman identifies "three types of satisfying endings: the Ah!, the Awww and the Ha!"

In the Ah!, the problem, goal or journey is resolved. In the Awww, we get a "classic warm and cozy ending." In the Ha!, the ending is a funny or surprising twist. I would add that any picture-book ending also needs to provide hope or the possibility of resolution for child readers.

In her draft of *Red is Best,* Stinson's last line is: "I guess you could say my favourite colour is red." This relates to her draft title *My Favourite Colour is Red.* Her published ending is: "I like red, because red is best."

In her revision, the sentiment is similar to the draft, although it's tighter and sure of itself. Kelly now knows what she likes and is not afraid to state it. During revision, Stinson also found herself a stronger title that echoes her final line. It's an Ah! ending, resolving that Kelly will not be swayed by Mom's interference.

In her draft and final versions of *Afghanistan*, Granfield reveals (through illustration) that her soldier protagonist is female with one empty sleeve due to a war injury. This is a Ha! moment, since most readers would assume the soldier is male. Both versions of the ending focus on a remembrance ceremony, where the protagonist wears a poppy and thinks of the men in her family who fought and lived with courage. She admits that "I will need such courage for my journey to my new life," adding an Awww element to the ending.

Granfield's draft ending reads, "I watch the veterans and I think of everyone who has been touched by war. Now I am a veteran with stories to share, when I'm ready."

In her final version, she cuts the first of those sentences and follows up with "Stories of a land far away and people I will never forget." This revision moves from the general to the specific, with an Awww moment that is sad yet inspiring.

The ending continues, in both versions, with children reciting the poem "In Flanders Fields" and laying a wreath of poppies on a memorial. The children represent hope for the future while also remembering the past. They also speak directly to the child reader. The final version then concludes with back matter about the international mission in Afghanistan.

As mentioned, Bourgeois's published ending for *Franklin* is identical to her draft. At night, Franklin crawls into his small, dark shell, even though he's afraid. He says a brave good night.

"And then, when nobody was looking, Franklin the turtle turned on his night light." This is an Ah! ending since Franklin has figured out how to cope with his fear, but it also has the funny twist of a Ha! ending because the night light is a surprise. Again, Bourgeois was aware of what worked in her story and knew to retain her final lines.

From these revised endings, we can apply these questions to our own revisions:

- From Stinson's revision: *How does my ending relate back to my opening and even my title? How does my ending relate to my character's original desire?*
- From Granfield's revision: *Have I ended with a sense of completion and even hope for the child reader?*
- From Bourgeois's revision: *Have I retained what works from previous drafts or my initial impulse?*
- From all these revisions: *Is my ending satisfying in terms of delivering an Ah!, Awww and/or Ha! moment?*

In the next issue of the *CANSCAIP News*, I'll share my analysis of how these authors revised the messy middles of their manuscripts as well as questions to ask when revising your own messy middles. Stay tuned!

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Editor's Note: Quotations from archival material by Paulette Bourgeois, Linda Granfield, and Kathy Stinson are used by permission.