

Typography for Picture Book Dummies

BY NANCY GOULET

You obsess over every word when writing your picture book. But do you give your typography equal consideration when laying out your dummy? Many illustrators focus on the pictures, leaving typography as an afterthought, while others labor over every little nuance.

Lynn Portnoff's witnessed all types—"from beautiful hand lettering and dynamic typesetting to really rough, penciled-in notes and default fonts. It's all over the map," said the Senior Art Director at Penguin Workshop, an imprint of Penguin Random House.

For the most part, a dummy's typographic state at acquisition isn't an issue for art directors. That's because when they're assigned the book the typography is typically stripped, and the designer usually reimagines the type.

Given this, why bother sweating the leading, the kerning, the font, and layout?

Because your attention to typography speaks volumes. "You have to consider that your dummy will most likely be seen by agents, editors, publishers, and not necessarily art directors [before being acquired] . . . Although your dummy isn't being judged for its type, this is a visual medium. If it's done poorly, it could be a distraction," said Portnoff.

What it communicates to Jim Hoover, Art Director at Viking Children's Books, is "this is someone I can work with. I'm

looking for someone thoughtful."

Amelia Mack, Children's Art Director, Chronicle Books, agrees. "It gives me the impression that the illustrator understands the book holistically."

When you're trying to get your dummy published, everything counts. In that spirit, art directors have provided some tips to help buff your dummy typography to a shine.

FONT SELECTION

When it comes to picking a typeface, many illustrators make the mistake of slapping a goofy font on their art because the book is aimed at children. "Not every book needs a font that screams KIDS," said Kristen Nobles, Art Director at Charlesbridge Publishing.

"Goofy fonts can be a really big turn off," agreed Mack. "It can really bring down the book."

For that reason, Hoover cautioned, "Stay away from Comic Sans. Art directors have such an aversion to it. It's a faux pas in the children's world."

Mack also suggested steering clear of any font that's an email default. Typically, those fonts tend toward the vanilla.

Senior Creative Director at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Books & Media, Children's and Adult Division Jessica Handelman advised asking, "Does the type compliment the art and not distract from it?" As an illustrator, you don't want to choose a font that demands too much



DIANA JORDAN

attention. Your art should be the star. The type should be the supporting cast.

For Portnoff, choosing an appropriate font begins with the question, "Is this a serif or sans serif book?" While there are several factors to weigh when making the decision, you can usually boil the choice down to pairing serif type with more realistic illustrations and sans serif with more cartoony illustrations, she said.

And if you're not sure what to pick, try different ones on, said Hoover. "Just play with them and see what fits."

TYPE SIZE

The sizing guideline according to Hoover is "the more words on the page, the smaller the typeface, the less words, the larger." Art directors suggested staying within the 14-20-point range.

COLOR

Keep your color choices to the art, the experts agreed. For production reasons, it's best to stick with black or white type. It shows you understand the printing process.

TYPE PLACEMENT

A big decision when considering text placement is the page count, said Mack. When designing a picture book Mack begins by roughly placing text on blank pages within InDesign. The exercise helps gauge flow, ensure there isn't too much type on any one page, and nail the page turns. "Flow in the type... If your manuscript ends up being 60 pages, it tells you something. Maybe you're saying things in the text that could be shown in the illustration instead."

Once that's decided, refine the type's placement in relation to the art. "Make sure your art considers the typography and makes space for it," said Handelman. Jasmin Rubero, Art Director at Kokila, an imprint of Penguin Random House, agreed. "A beautiful spread

always has a great plan and placement for the type on that page."

Another important consideration is to make sure the type moves the reader, continued Rubero. "When I'm designing a book, I want to make sure that the text is read in the right order—not only in sequence, but how the composition of the art moves the eye around the page and considers when the reader needs to see something first then read, or the reverse of that."

The experts offered these additional placement basics:

- Stay away from the gutter. Give around a half-inch berth on either side.
- Delineate your margins and keep clear of them. Hoover's a fan of generous margin's —1-1.5 inches.
- Don't place your type over the action or a character's expression, said Nobles.
- Make sure the layout and art are working together. "I often tell designers to move the type closer to the art or move it above or below it so that the story flows better," said Portnoff.

Lastly, pace your story. If you see big blocks of type, break them up into smaller blurbs or distribute the text onto other pages. "It can be overwhelming if the typography takes up too much of the page," said Chloë Foglia, Art Director, Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, Paula Wiseman Books, Denene Miller Books, and Salaam Reads.

BOLD, ITALICS, SCRIPT & EFFECTS

Most art directors warn script fonts should be avoided. "Script fonts tend to be very hard to read for kids," said Rubero. "Many school districts do not teach cursive writing in elementary school so for younger readers those letters will be tough to recognize. With that in mind, if there is a typeface that is clear and makes sense for the book

then it's an option to consider."

Ditto on the effects, said Mack. That includes outlines, drop shadows, or distortions of fonts. Use type on a path sparingly—and if you do, make sure it doesn't compete with the art.

Use bold and italics for emphasis only—like sound effects. Remember that bold can come off as though you're yelling.

TITLE TREATMENT

The title treatment is your artistic moment, typographically speaking. So, if you're inclined toward hand lettering, the art directors say, 'have at it.'

"When the illustrator has a strong vision for the title type it's good to include... If [the title type] lettering will make a strong cover, we might keep that design, or base the final typography on that design," said Rubero.

And if you don't have hand lettering as a skill but want your title type to have a more hand-rendered feel, Mack suggests tracing a font.

STEP AWAY

Once you've completed your dummy, step away, recommended Mack. "There comes a time when you can't see the type anymore. Give yourself time to come back to your typography to evaluate it fresh."

When you've distanced from the work, examine your typography critically to guarantee it serves the story. Remember, concluded Portnoff, "Good type will showcase the art and story. Great type will elevate it."

NANCY GOULET is principal at studiowink, a boutique, multi-disciplinary, graphic design firm. She also serves as Massachusetts College of Art and Design's graphic design certificate program professional design mentor. She is an aspiring picture book writer and illustrator.

DEPENDABLE FACES

Don't want to spend hours hunting down a font for your dummy? Art directors suggest their trusty typeface favorites.

CHLOË FOGLIA

Art Director, Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, Paula Wiseman Books, Denene Miller Books, and Salaam Reads

- Garamond

JIM HOOVER

Art Director, Viking Children's Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House

- Times New Roman

AMELIA MACK

Children's Art Director, Chronicle Books

- Avenir
- Mrs. Eaves
- Mr. Eaves
- Neutra
- Quincy CF

KRISTEN NOBLES

Art Director, Charlesbridge Publishing

- Helvetica
- Futura

LYNN PORTNOFF

Senior Art Director at Penguin Workshop, an imprint of Penguin Random House

- Century Schoolbook
- Futura

JASMIN RUBERO

Art Director at Kokila, an imprint of Penguin Random House

- Dapifer
- Monroe
- Andes Rounded