

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

What A Rejection Letter Can Tell You About Your Writing

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Adapted from a talk by Melanie Cecka

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Theme: The underlying meaning of a story

When an editor says . . . they may mean

"Didactic/heavy-handed" . . . you've submitted a lesson- or moral-driven story. Hits the reader over the head with your message.

"Lacks staying power/may not endure" . . . this story doesn't strike a nerve or may not be the kind of story a child will ask to hear/want to read over and over again.

Plot: What the story is all about. The "what happens next?" or "page-turning appeal" of both picture books and fiction.

When an editor says . . . they may mean

"Slight or thin" . . . not enough going on. Premise seems too weak to build a story around.

"Predictable" . . . reader knows from start to finish what to expect of the story.

"Clichéd" . . . may be trite, unoriginal.

"Too wordy/too long" . . . particularly in a picture book. Story takes too long to read; young listeners may lose interest along the way. Too many descriptions used where artwork could show all that is needed.

"Slow-paced" . . . the story drags, or takes too long to get where it's going.

"Sentimental" . . . may reflect an adult's interest in childhood experiences/views, rather than being from a child's perspective. Story is likely to appeal more to an adult than to a child.

"Quiet" . . . not enough happens, lacks an inner-propulsion to move the story forward. A mood story.

"Abstract/lofty/arch" . . . ideas that a younger reader might not follow. Often a case of the author trying to be too quirky or clever. Also describes texts that are overly "poetic."

"Formulaic" . . . a pat story, typecast or stereotyped characters, and predictable turns of event.

"Familiar" . . . too many competing books or similar stories.

"One-joke book" . . . a story that builds to a punch-line; a story that's too dependent on a gag. Once read, no reason to read again.

"Not compelling enough" . . . lacks emotional resonance, doesn't draw readers in or may not succeed in holding their attention. Not memorable.

"Ending is a bit of a letdown" . . . might be too pat, tidy, rushed, or serendipitous.

"Somewhat obvious as a mystery" . . . doesn't challenge the reader.

"Disjointed" . . . story feels unfocused or all-over-the place. Narrative order may be confusing. Flashbacks may hinder reading.

"Too many subplots/plot strands" . . . too much going on to tie all the different story threads together effectively.

"Too episodic" . . . a list-like plot; a series of events that don't necessarily add up to a complete story.

Voice: The personality of the narrative. Voice lends prose its feeling of time and place, sets the mood, establishes a tone, and creates a distinct sense of the narrator and story.

When an editor says . . . they may mean:

"Too sophisticated/not child-like enough" . . . Voice isn't right for the age-level or experiences of the audience. POV may be that of the author/adult, rather than the child.

"Too coy" (also, too cute, too precious, too sweet, too sentimental) . . . May inadvertently insult readers by dumbing-down to the intended age level.

"Doesn't engage" . . . Lacks tension or an emotional quality that will draw the reader in and hold their interest.

"Not believable/credible" . . . reflects thoughts/ideas/POV that appear to come from someone other than the character (usually the author/adult). Particularly noticeable in dialogue.

"Self-conscious/forced/stilted/formal/awkward" . . . hand of the author is evident. Author doesn't sound at ease in their writing.

"Condescending/didactic/heavy-handed" . . . talks down to readers. Spells out whatever point the author wishes to make. Lacks subtlety and understatement.

Style: A writer's use of language. Part voice, part tone, part use of literary devices. Style and voice influence one another.

When an editor says . . . they may mean:

"Forced/contrived/strained" . . . writing doesn't feel natural, personification may be a reach. See also self-conscious, above.

"Stilted/awkward" . . . Rhymed verse that is sing-songy or ends in flat, uninspired rhyme. In older fiction, might be author's phrasing or dialogue. Language that sounds discordant, or somehow "off."

Character: The cast. Characters connect the audience to the story, so a young reader must be able to identify with the main character.

When an editor says . . . they may mean:

"Characters are flat (or one-dimensional, stock, stereotyped)" . . . Characterizations aren't believable, aren't fresh. Author relies on standard personality types and descriptions.

"Not well-rounded, not fully fleshed out" . . . characterizations lack development. May need physical descriptions, more insights by the character that give rise to action, more dialogue to establish the character. Well-rounded characters change and grow, make choices, react to consequences.

"Character is not a sympathetic/empathetic one" . . . Too much emotional distance between the reader and the characters. Reader is not compelled by, or can't identify with the character, and this weakens the impact of the story.

Audience: the group the book is intended to reach (see also, markets)

When an editor says . . . they may mean:

"Audience is unclear" . . . subject may not be aimed at the right age/grade level. Example: a picture book with 12-year-old characters. Appeal to a particular age group isn't readily evident.

"Audience isn't big enough" . . . subject matter has limited or not enough appeal. Premise is too specialized/unfamiliar to attract a broad or general audience.

Markets: the publisher's audience or niche

When an editor says . . . they may mean:

"Not right for our list" . . . Example, a science fiction novel pitched to an editor who publishes only non-fiction; classroom or curricular-linked materials that are sent to a trade publisher rather than an educational publisher. May also be a catch-all for manuscripts that just don't measure up to house standards.

"Better as a magazine piece" . . . a good premise that's not strong enough to support an entire book. Quiet stories/short stories often fall into this category.

"Hard or difficult format" . . . may be too close to a novelty to work in the school and library market, too expensive to work as a retail book.

Miscellaneous:

"Just don't love it enough" . . . doesn't appeal to an editor's personal tastes or area of expertise.