**GIVE US WONDER AND SURPRISE**. Introduce something wondrous or surprising within the first paragraph or so: and certainly within the first page. Think about ordinary situations, and how you might undercut them: the white rabbit in Alice in Wonderland is an excellent example.

**CREATE PERSPECTIVE**. Decide whether you’re telling the story from the perspective of a child, or from an omniscient narrator. Either way brings its own problems. But do try to see the world through a child’s eyes.

**PLOT IS CRUCIAL**. You plot must be cast-iron, and must have an onward pull. Always think about your plot as a series of connected links: if you take one out, the whole thing should break down.

**A NOTE ON HEROES:** your protagonist should be sympathetic and normal enough for children to want to read about, but also have some kind of character trait that sets them apart. Harry Potter, for instance, is a fairly unsurprising character; but he does have a great deal of courage.

**A NOTE ON VILLAINS:** these can often be made to look ridiculous. Others may want their villains to be as wicked and sinister as possible. Either way, they must present a real threat to the protagonist, whether it’s preventing them from having more jam, or setting loose an army of black dragons.

**A FULLY REALISED SETTING WILL BEGET ITS OWN CHARACTERS**. Think carefully about where you’re setting your book and why. The arc of a children’s book will usually see

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the protagonist beginning at home, going out into the world, and then returning to the safe domestic sphere.

**READ YOUR SENTENCES OUT LOUD**. It’s extraordinary what you notice when you do this. Concerning style, I’ve critiqued hundreds of manuscripts, and too often I see the same problems: clotted sentences, packed paragraphs, and no sensitivity to the resonances individual words. A sentence should sing out. It should have a sharp clarity.

# In summary

• Surprise readers

• Look at the world through a child’s eyes

• Your plot should be a series of connected links

• Give the hero or heroine a character trait that sets them apart

• Villains must present a real threat

• Think where you’re setting your book and why

• Read your sentences out loud to gauge clarity