Writing Humor

Tickle young readers’ funny bones: 12¾ Ways.
By Donna Gephart

Humor in children’s books satisfies ravenous readers and even reaches reluctant ones. It generates excitement from agents, editors, booksellers and librarians. It’s powerful stuff! After all, who doesn’t love to laugh?

To effectively get kids giggling you’ll first need to match humor to your readers’ age level.

The very young understand opposites, incongruity and slapstick, such as a dog that’s very large and not a standard color—Clifford the Big Red Dog by Norman Bridwell. Or a duck who types notes to a farmer—Click Clack Moo: Cows That Type by Doreen Cronin. Or a child being turned into a pizza—Pete’s a Pizza by William Steig.

Children in early elementary school giggle at potty humor. What young child can resist a book titled: Captain Underpants and the Perilous Plot of Professor Poopypants (by Dav Pilky)? Or Andy Griffith’s book, The Day My Butt Went Psycho? Children at this age also understand and enjoy books with wordplay, like Amelia Bedelia by Peggy Parish, in which Amelia, when asked to draw the curtains, pulls out a marker and creates a picture of curtains. In Deputy Dan and the Bank Robbers by Joseph Bloom, when the sheriff tells Deputy Dan to hop over to the bank, he stands on one foot and literally hops to the bank. And Avi’s A Beginning, A Muddle, and an End: The Right Way to Write Writing brims with fun wordplay.

For middle-grade readers, humor evolves naturally from the characters’ quirks and situations in which they find themselves, as in Ella Enchanted by Gail Carson Levine, about a spirited girl who is forced to be utterly obedient. When Ella is told to do something she doesn’t want to, she uses funny tactics to stall, such as doing what the person asks, but not in the way she intended.

Young adult readers delight in sarcasm, irony and subtle complexities. Ella Minnow Pea by Mark Dunn fits the bill. It’s an epistolary novel about a tiny town that pays homage to the man who invented the sentence: “he quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog,” which uses every letter of the alphabet. A statue is erected with those words on it. As age and wear cause letters to fall off, citizens aren’t allowed to use those letters in correspondence. It’s hilarious to observe Ella creatively use fewer and fewer letters in her correspondence.
Whether you write picture books, early readers, middle grade or young adult novels, there are 12¾ tips and techniques to keep in mind when creating humor:

**#1 TAKE RISKS.**
A book that does this beautifully is *The True Meaning of Smekday* by Adam Rex. In this novel, the world is invaded by aliens (twice). The main character, Gratuity (“Tip”) Tucci befriends a renegade alien, J. Lo, and ventures to Happy Mouse Kingdom to find Gratuity’s mother, figure out what’s going on and save the planet. It’s a risky plot to try to pull off, but it works for exactly that reason.

**#2 TELL THE TRUTH.**
Those things we recognize as true are often the funniest. Mark Twain once said, “Humor is tragedy plus time.” Examples of this span books for all ages. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie is heartbreaking in its truth-telling, but hilarious at the same time.
And in the picture book *Diary of a Worm*, Doreen Cronin tells the truth of young children: It’s hard to be small and unnoticed.
As Erma Bombeck once said, “here is a thin line that separates laughter and pain, comedy and tragedy, humor and hurt.”

**#3 MINE YOUR EMBARRASSMENT.**
What an odd lot we writers are. When something embarrassing happens, we brush ourselves off and think, *This will make a great story.*
David LaRochelle writes brilliantly about an embarrassing situation in his novel *Absolutely Positively Not*. While Steven DeNarski is purchasing a *Playboy* magazine, his former first grade teacher strolls into the store. Under the watchful eyes of a clerk, Steven ends up buying breath mints, a box of plastic forks, a can of WD-40, *New Baby, The Magazine for Young Mothers* and extra absorbent diapers. Embarrassment, when not happening to you, is downright hilarious.

**#4 SURPRISE YOUR READER.**
Surprise is a delightful tool, especially in picture books—and especially at the end of picture books. Endings should always satisfy and provide a promised resolution, but in an unexpected way.
*Think of the Monster at the End of his Book* by Jon Stone. (Spoiler alert here.) The monster that Grover worries about meeting is actually
himself. Surprise!

**#5 USE CHARACTER QUIRKS TO CREATE EMPATHY, AFFECTION AND HUMOR.**

In *Walter the Farting Dog* by William Kotzwinkle, Glenn Murray and Audrey Colman, what seems like a detriment—Walter’s unbelievably bad-smelling farts—ends up saving the day.

Lisa Yee’s *Millicent (Millicent Min: Girl Genius)* has such a high I.Q., she’s unable to understand social cues. The first sentence of Yee’s novel clues the reader into the quirks of her character: “I have been accused of being anal retentive, an overachiever, and a compulsive perfectionist, like those are bad things.”

**#6 CREATE UNLIKELY SITUATIONS.**

Put your character in an uncomfortable situation or one that’s the opposite of what’s expected, such as a brash tomboy being forced to go to charm school.

*Freaky Friday*, the classic switcheroo novel by Mary Rodgers, puts a child in an adult’s world when the main character wakes one morning to discover she’s inhabiting her mother’s body. With this perspective, a parent teacher conference has never been so amusing. A pigeon should obviously be poking around a city sidewalk or lying, not contemplating driving a bus. But when one does, the unexpected situation makes Mo Willem’s *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* a rip-roaring success.

**#7 USE CREATIVE FORMATS.**

You need to think not only about the story you want to tell, but how you want to tell it. Consider the variety of formats available: diary, cartoons, poems, songs, symbols, charts, footnotes, e-mails, etc.

In Jennifer L. Holm’s *Middle School Is Worse Than Meatloaf: A Year Told through Stuff*, every manner of “stuff” is used to create a meaningful novel. Between the covers of this inventive book, you’ll find a drug store receipt, notes from the fridge, English assignments, comic strips, etc.

Louise Rennison uses the “list” format within her YA novel, *Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging: Confessions of Georgia Nicolson*, to great effect:
There are six things very wrong with my life:

1. I have one of those under-the-skin spots that will never come to a head but lurk in a red way for the next two years.
2. It is on my nose.
3. I have a three-year-old sister who may have peed somewhere in my room.
4. In fourteen days the summer hols will be over and then it will be back to Stalag 14 and Oberführer Frau Simpson and her bunch of sadistic “teachers.”
5. I am very ugly and need to go into an ugly house.
6. I went to a party dressed as a stuffed olive.

#8 UTILIZE THE SOUND OF LANGUAGE.

The “K” sound is funny (even when it’s made by a “C” or “CK”) as in the following: Chicken is funny. Roast beef is not. Pickle is funny. Spinach is not. Twinkie is funny. Pie is not.

An example of a title that employs the “K” sound is The Chicken Doesn’t Skate by Gordon Korman.

Alliteration can produce fun sounds, too. Just take a look at Margaret Atwood’s picture book, Princess Prunella and the Purple Peanut, which is full of more “P” words than you could shake a pickle at.

Pay attention to the sound of what you write, especially for books that will be read aloud.

#9 USE SPECIFIC DETAILS IN YOUR WRITING.

Don’t say, “He ate his lunch.” Opt instead for: “He nibbled on his peanut butter and hot dog sandwich with a side of Granny’s prize-winning Cheez Whiz cookies.”

In my favorite picture book, Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs (its sequel is Pickles to Pittsburgh) by Judi and Ron Barrett, food doesn’t simply fall out of the sky, but “After a brief shower of orange juice, low clouds of sunnyside up eggs moved in followed by pieces of toast. Butter and jelly sprinkled down for the toast. And most of the time it rained milk afterwards.”

The more specific your details, the more clearly your reader can envision the scene and the funnier it will be.
#10 EXAGGERATE OR UNDERSTATE.

Both exaggeration and understatement are important tools in your humor-writing toolbox.

The tall tale is exaggeration at its finest. For an excellent example of exaggeration, take a peek at Sid Fleishman’s *McBroom’s Wonderful One-Acre Farm: Three Tall Tales*. On McBroom’s farm, the soil is so rich that even nickels grow into quarters.

To employ understatement, when something big happens, downplay it, like referring to a hurricane as a tropical breeze or rock music as a gentle lullaby.

An example of understatement can be found in *The Dumb Bunnies’ Easter*, by Dav Pilkey:

“Oh, yeah?” said Poppa Bunny. “Well, I hope the Easter Bunny brings me a THOUSAND dollars.”

“I hope the Easter Bunny brings me a balloon,” said Baby Bunny.

“Now don’t be greedy,” said Momma and Poppa Bunny.

“I’m sorry,” said Baby Bunny.

#11 BE SILLY.

When all else fails, employ complete and utter nonsense and silliness.

In *Purple, Green and Yellow* by Robert Munsch, when Brigid announces she needs new colouring markers, her mother goes out and gets “500 super-indelible-never-come-off-till-you’re-dead-and-maybe-even-later colouring markers.”

In Jon Scieszka’s *Math Curse*, young readers are delighted by unique ways of looking at math in everyday life, including this silly math equation: “Does tunafish + tunafish = fournafish?”

For an absurd situation, look no further than the classic, *Mr. Popper’s Penguins* by Richard and Florence Atwater. At 432 Proudfoot Avenue, Mr. Popper ends up caring for 12 penguins!

#12 GIVE HUMOROUS CHARACTERS FUNNY NAMES.

For inspiration, consider some of these names from children’s literature: Ron Weasley, Cindy Lou Who, Ramona Quimby, Mrs. Biddlebox, Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle, the Remarkable Farkle McBride, Joey Pigza, Fudge, Henry and Mudge, Pippi Longstocking, Anastasia Krupnik, etc.
Feeling stuck? You can find names in playbills, obituary listings, the phone book, the masthead of magazines, etc. I’ve even glanced at lists of pet names, such as in this site: babynames.com/Names/Pets/

#12¾ DON’T TRY TO BE FUNNY.

Forced humor is no fun for anyone.

Sometimes it’s best to get the story out, then go back to find opportunities to add humor as you work through your revisions.

Dave Barry has said his first drafts really weren’t that funny. He added humor during revisions.

Ultimately, aim to please an audience of one—you yourself! If what you write cracks you up, chances are young readers will enjoy it, too. K•YA

Donna Gephart’s first novel, As If Being 12¾ Isn’t Bad Enough, My Mother Is Running for President! won the prestigious Sid Fleischman Humor Award. She is also the author of How to Survive Middle School (without getting your head flushed), Deal With an Ex-best Friend, Um, Girls and a Heart-breaking Hamster. To learn more, visit donnagephart.com.