



Tips for Writing to Children's Book Authors/Illustrators

*Dear Ms. Wardlaw:
I'm doing a report about you and your books for school.
Please send me everything there is to know about you.
And hurry! My report is due tomorrow.
Sincerely, Your #1 Fan*

I receive loads of letters and emails like this every year. And, although my favorite subjects to yak about are 'Me' and 'My Books', I usually need a specific question or three to get me going.

I also like to see that students are using a bit of mental elbow grease. This is their homework assignment, not mine. It's important for students to think about what specifically they'd like to know about me – and why.

Oh, and call me finicky, but I really, really, really need more than a few hours notice!

So if you're a teacher or librarian planning a Write-to-Your-Favorite Author (or Illustrator) project, consider the following tips. They'll help the assignment go more smoothly for you, your students and, uh, ME!

- Make sure the author/illustrator is still alive! (A quick Google search will confirm)
- Do a Google search for the author's/illustrator's website, blog or Facebook page. These usually contain contact info with an email and/or postal address. If you can't find a personal website, visit the publisher's site for more info.
- Plan to have your students write to their chosen author/illustrator several weeks (or even months) before the project deadline – especially if they are snail-mailing in care of the publishing company. Fan mail is forwarded to most authors only about twice a year. I know disappointment is in a child's future if I receive a letter that reads: "I need to interview you by next week for my book report" – and the postmark date was six months ago!
- Email the author/illustrator asking if she prefers to receive fan letters via email or snail mail. If the latter, request a postal address.

- If there is a deadline for your project, remember to inform the author or illustrator. We travel frequently for conferences, school visits and book signings, and need to schedule office time for fan mail on top of our usual writing schedule. (I often receive requests from students to decorate a piece of cloth for a literary quilt or to send my favorite recipe for a cookbook. I'm not adept at sewing or cooking, so please allow two-to-four weeks to hear back from me!)
- Enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope with each fan letter. If using the school's address, make sure your name and room number (or department) are included. Students should use their full name on the letter and on the return envelope. (Example: Jane Doe, c/o Ms. Whiz, Rm. 7; Red Riding Hood Elementary School, 123 Yellow Brick Road, My Town, My State, 12345.)
- Before composing a letter or email, suggest that your students spend time thinking about what specific questions they'd like to ask – rather than grabbing the super easy ones such as *Where do you get your ideas?* or *Do you like writing?* For example, they might want to ask about a particular character or situation in which they most identified. Or, if they are interested in becoming authors themselves, they could ask for tips on how to reach that goal. Also, consider discussing possible questions with your class as a whole.

Sincerely,
Lee Wardlaw