

Work for Hire: Breaking into the Educational Market

by Angie Smibert

You've probably heard that work for hire (WFH) is a great way to break into publishing. True. WFH is also a solid way to fill in pesky income gaps. A few years ago, I found myself between novel series. Through my agent(s), I had unsuccessfully tried out for a few fiction WFH projects. Then I discovered the educational WFH market, STEM nonfiction in particular. That seemed a natural fit for me. Before writing fiction (and teaching), I'd been a science writer for over twenty years, working with NASA, the Department of Energy, and the Environmental Protection Agency. Fast-forward a few years and as of early 2019, I've written twenty-seven education market nonfiction books!

How do you break into educational (or trade) market WFH? And do you really want to?

Illustration: TAMM TRAYLOR, traylorillo.com



First of all, book packagers and publishers typically have a pool of writers to which they assign books or other projects. Some publishers use packagers or producers. Others work directly with writers. Either way, to get considered for upcoming projects, you need to get yourself into one or more of those pools.

Step 1: Find Your Niche

My niche wasn't too hard to figure out. I wrote about space, the environment, and technology for adults for years. Plus, I also did a little coding. So my niche became STEM for elementary and middle school readers. For this age, most of these books are what's called high interest. Wrapped in glossy covers, high-interest books are chock full of visuals and sidebars. Most include activities, prompts, discussion points, and/or other special features. Often, publishers try to correlate those special features to align with Common Core and/or other standards.

If STEM is not your thing, don't worry. The educational market spans many, many nonfiction topics, formats, and age ranges. For instance, sports books are huge. (I even wrote a STEM sports book.) So are history, biographies, animals, health and fitness, careers, crafts, and social studies, to name just a few. And publishers need these books at all reading levels, including hi-lo and leveled readers. (Many publishers put out these books in Spanish too.)

Step 2: Research the Market

You can find educational publishers and book packagers through a number of resources. Once you find publishers and/or packagers that

Market Resources

- [SCBWI Work-for-Hire Board](#)
- [Evelyn Christensen's Educational Markets for Children's Writers](#)
- [Molly Blaisdell's Work for Hire: Select Educational Publishers List](#)
- [American Book Producers Association](#)
- [Literary Market Place](#)

One of these things is not like the other:

Unlike personal writing projects, WFH projects require an author to fulfill a writing assignment usually for a flat fee as per a publisher's preestablished book format, one that generally fits into a series of books.

interest you, study their catalogs, and double-check their websites for submission guidelines for freelancers.

Step 3: Put Together Samples and a Cover Letter

Once you've decided who you want to work for and in what areas, you need to send them a cover letter as well as samples of your work. If you don't have any samples, you may have to write some, depending on the publisher/packager. Some might request a resume instead. Most publishers and producers include freelancer or work-for-hire information on their websites.

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Critiquing Your Picture Book Dummies

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- » Are the settings populated with elements realistic to the world of the story?
- » Are there elements that reflect the characters' personalities and interests?
- » Do prominent props randomly appear in or disappear from characters' hands?
- » Do the illustrations reflect the time of day?
- » Do the illustrations use weather to help tell the story?

Individual Image Composition:

- » Do any individual illustrations stand out as breaking the rhythm and dynamic flow?
- » Do the illustrations contribute to moving the story forward?
- » Do the illustrations move the viewer's attention toward the next page?
- » Do the illustrations show active characters and objects in motion rather than posed?

- » Are visual focal points in the right places? If not, how can they be improved?
- » Do any details stand out as inconsistent between pages (e.g., patterns on clothing, wearing glasses, weather, time of day)?
- » Do the illustrations show a dynamic range of contrast and value?
- » Do any crops or angles look awkward?

Visual Space:

- » Do the illustrations incorporate well with the text placement?
- » Does the use of space feel balanced? Is there a good balance of positive and negative space?

Technical:

- » Is anything important (faces, hands, or anything with detail) trapped in the gutter or too close to the edges?
- » Is text placed at least an inch away from the gutter?

- » Is the dummy at an industry-standard page count (multiples of eight)?
- » How many story pages are there?
- » Are your pages numbered?
- » What is the spread count (around 14 spreads for a 32-page book)?
- » Has the artist left room for or illustrated a title page and front matter?
- » Is the dummy at industry-standard trim size or ratio (usually 8x10 or 10x8)? **H**



Mishka is a freelance illustrator and graphic designer living in Reston, Virginia. She's done work for Scholastic; 10 to 2 Children's Books; the Starbright Organization; Marvel, DC, and Image comics; and for educational companies k12 and Wisewire. She holds a BFA in theatrical design and joined the SCBWI in 1997. mishkajaeger.com and [@MishkaJaeger](https://twitter.com/MishkaJaeger). Photo: Charlotte Geary Photography

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The cover letter is really the critical element, though. In it, describe your experience, areas of expertise, education, publication history, availability, and so forth. Be specific! Don't just say your expertise is STEM. For instance, I usually say my areas are space, environmental science, computers, and internet technology. Your specific expertise and experience may get you the gig.

Step 4: Send Out and Wait

Send out the samples and cover letter—and wait. You may not hear anything until the publisher or packager has a project that fits your skills and interests. This could be a week or two—or many, many months.

Is this the right kind of WFH work for you? I enjoy the work, but to be brutally honest, the pay rates can be very low (\$300 for a 500–750-word book, for example) and the turnaround times can be extremely tight (as little as one

month!). So you need to be able to research and write quickly and efficiently—not just to meet the deadlines but to also make it worth your time! (Some WFH writers also do school visits.) More importantly, though, you should love writing about science and technology—or whatever your niche is—and be able to break down concepts without writing down to the readers. **H**



Angie has penned several YA and MG science-fiction and fantasy novels. She's also written over twenty-five educational work-for-hire titles. As a science writer, Angie received NASA's prestigious Silver Snoopy award. She teaches writing for Indiana University East and for the online MFA program at Southern New Hampshire University. angiesmibert.com Photo: David Michaels Photography