HOW TO BE A
CHILDREN'S
BOOK
ILLUSTRATOR

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CHARACTER APPEAL

USE OF COLOR

PAGE TURNS

THUMBNAILING
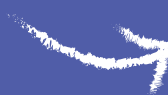
50%

of net profits donated
TO CHARITY

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We focus our giving on three charitable areas: **environmental**, **humanitarian**, and **animal welfare**. We use organizations such as Effective Altruism and Founders Pledge to guide who we help within these causes. Some ways of doing good are over 100 times more effective than others, so donating this way hugely increases the impact of our contributions.

See **3dtotal.com/charity** for full details.

CONSIDERING YOUR AUDIENCE

Audience is one of the first things to think about when illustrating a children's book. The imagery you create needs to be compelling and relatable for each child that reads it, but considering the fast rate at which children develop and the different backgrounds children have, the concept of a children's book can become quite broad! Children's books can therefore be split up into a few sub-groups, each with its own factors to consider.

The most crucial and recognized of these is age, as children's books are usually divided into and sold under the following age groups: 0–24 months, 2–4 years, 4–6 years, and 6–8 years. Though these age brackets are only a couple of years apart, there are significant differences in how you illustrate for each one in order to cater to the intellectual development of children at these different ages. For example, board books for babies aged 0–24 months, where imagery is the most important element, will look significantly different to a book aimed at eight-year-olds, who will likely be reading independently.

While keeping age in mind, you also need to consider the different kinds of backgrounds children come from and what each child will find relatable. This means your illustrations should be inclusive of all children, including those of different races, cultures, sizes, and abilities. Taking the target age range along with different backgrounds into account will help you to create a captivating and relatable body of illustrations that all children can enjoy.

"YOUR ILLUSTRATIONS SHOULD BE INCLUSIVE OF ALL CHILDREN, INCLUDING THOSE OF DIFFERENT RACES, CULTURES, SIZES, AND ABILITIES"

It's important to consider the age of the intended audience as well as what backgrounds the children reading the book might have.

AGE

Age is the most important sub-group to consider before you start illustrating a children's book. Whether you have been commissioned for a book or are writing one yourself, you must first discern what age the book is aimed at, in order to create interesting and engaging imagery for your target audience.

Due to children's fast intellectual development, books for each age range will differ in a number of ways, including in the amount and level of text, color palette, character design, and overall detail of the illustrations.

0-24 MONTHS

- Board books for babies and toddlers, read aloud by an adult.

- Simple text and illustrations.

- Illustrations are bright and eye-catching, featuring simple shapes and bright, bold colors.

- Characters are made up of simple shapes and small features, and are usually animal characters or very young children.

2-4 YEARS

- Picture books for preschool-age children.

- Minimal text, but slightly more complicated narratives.

- Usually read aloud by an adult to a child.

- Illustrations have more detail but are still engaging. Color palettes are often used to depict different moods in the narrative.

- Characters are a mix of children and animals, with children having large heads and small bodies (though bigger than characters in board books), paired with proportionate limbs and facial features.

4-6 YEARS

- Picture books, but with mid-level text and more interesting narratives.

- Adults and children read together, as the child starts to learn to read.

- Illustrations become a little more complex to match the text.

- Use of bright colors to keep things interesting, though may vary depending on the tone and mood of the text.

- Characters are mostly children and look a little older, with slightly longer bodies and necks.

6–8 YEARS

- Books become more dependent on the text than illustrations, resembling mini novels/ chapter books.

- Generally independently read by the child without an adult helping.

- Illustrations are still important to keep the reader engaged, but are generally black and white with more vignettes and spot illustrations (see page 22) than full-page artwork. Capturing the mood is also important.

- Characters look a little older, with longer bodies and necks, and with more proportionate heads.

As the target age increases, so does the sophistication of the text, age of the characters, and level of detail in the illustrations, allowing children to continue finding enjoyment and interest in books as they grow older.

There are numerous things to take into account when considering the intended age of your audience, which can make starting work on a children's book a little daunting at times. Here are some useful tips to get you started:

Carry out visual research: This can come in many different forms, the most useful of which is looking at children's books that have already been published. This will help you distinguish the visual development of books across the different age groups, which will benefit your illustrations greatly. Most children's book illustrators will have their own mini library of children's books to refer to, regardless of whether or not they have children themselves!

Talk to young children: Talking to your target audience will help you work out the sort of things that excite them and pique their interest. You can even show them your illustrations to get some first-hand feedback and see if there's anything you need to change in order to capture and hold their attention.

Respect your audience: It's sometimes easy to assume that children's level of understanding is limited and therefore children's books should be overly simple and primitive, but this is not the case. Children are capable of understanding a lot of complex issues and this is something you can reflect in your illustrations. For example, you can convey the seriousness of a situation by using darker color palettes in your illustrations, but remember to keep the style light and appropriate for the age group so it remains appealing and not too scary.

"LOOKING AT CHILDREN'S BOOKS THAT HAVE ALREADY BEEN PUBLISHED... WILL HELP YOU DISTINGUISH THE VISUAL DEVELOPMENT OF BOOKS ACROSS THE DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS"

DIVERSITY

Within every age group there will be an abundance of readers from a variety of different backgrounds, upbringings, and ethnicities, all of which need consideration. Children's books are set in different countries around the globe, which means illustrators need to look beyond their own perspective and experiences to discover how different children might experience the world. By doing this you will broaden your audience, as more children will be able to relate to your work. So how can you achieve this?

Start by considering where your book is set and make sure the characters and environment reflect this. If the story is set in an Indian jungle, you will need to research the people groups who live in Indian jungles, as well as the sort of animals and plants found there. This will make the illustrations feel more believable to the reader. If the book is set in a world with no specific location, then it's important to try to include characters from lots of different backgrounds, including different genders, ethnicities, cultures, and abilities. Every child reading your book should feel like they have some form of representation in your work – you don't want anyone to feel left out or like they don't belong.

If the book is set in a specific location, such as an Indian jungle, you need to consider the type of clothing people would wear there.

It would also be crucial to research the types of animals and plants found in an Indian jungle, like elephants, monkeys, and tigers!

TONE

The next factor to explore is the tone of the book. This is particularly something to consider for books for older age groups, as their narratives are usually a little more complex, often teaching children how to cope with situations they will go through in life, such as moving house, bullying, and other fears or worries. As board books for babies and toddlers have much simpler narratives, their tone is generally light and happy, with illustrations that reflect this.

The tone may change throughout the book to reflect certain scenes in the narrative. It's the illustrator's job to convey any change in tone

through the artwork. This will help the reader to feel the characters' emotions and better understand the story, keeping them engaged and invested in the book. The tone should always remain grounded, however, so that it doesn't overwhelm or become too much for the reader.

There are a few different ways imagery can be used to convey tone in a story, including perspective, scale, and, most predominantly, color. For example, if the story has a scene where a child character is lost in a crowd, you could emphasize the fear and confusion of such an overwhelming situation by drawing

the character very small among a crowd of tall adults. Adding rain and using grays and blues would further emphasize the upsetting situation, though it shouldn't be overly dark or heavy for the reader. A good balance could be achieved by adding a pop of color to the character's outfit, drawing the reader's attention to them, in addition to adding a light source that the character is heading toward, to convey hope that things will get better. Then, when the character finds their way out of the crowd and is no longer lost, you can change the colors so they're lighter, brighter, and more cheerful, reflecting the joyful tone of the scene.

The young child character is shown walking alone down a crowded street in the rain. The use of cool blues and grays emphasizes the worry he feels as well as the coldness of the rain, while the yellow contrasts against the blue and conveys a feeling of hope.

"THE TONE MAY CHANGE THROUGHOUT THE BOOK TO REFLECT CERTAIN SCENES IN THE NARRATIVE"

The character has found what they were looking for – their puppy friend! The colors are still blue for continuity, but the backdrop behind them is warm and inviting, reflecting their feelings of happiness.

DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS

After considering your audience's age, background, and the tone of the book, it's important to take some time to consider how an image could come across to different readers. As an illustrator you need to be aware of your own preconceptions and visual understanding in order to recognize when an image is likely to be misunderstood by others. This means carefully making sure the emotions and actions of the characters and scenes are easily discernible to readers.

For example, does your character look obviously happy in the happy scene you're drawing, or could their expression and body language be mistaken for another emotion? Does the playground scene look like a playground, or could it be misinterpreted as a back garden? Does it look like the character is brushing their teeth, or could they be misinterpreted as doing something else?

The best way to avoid misinterpretation is to use references:

Characters
- Draw from life, studying people around you as well as yourself, or sign up for life-drawing classes.

- Look at other children's books to see how different illustrators convey emotion.

- Watch movies, particularly animated ones, to study expression and body language.

- Look up images of various poses, gestures, and expressions online.

Backgrounds
- Study the sorts of objects you would find in that environment.

- Watch movies that include a similar setting and draw from them to help make your character's world feel whole.

- Look up different places and environments online.

- Look at other children's books to see how different illustrators have designed similar backgrounds.

However, it's important to ensure your work is entirely original and not copied from any of your reference material. If you're feeling unsure about the clarity of your work, try stepping back and not looking at it for a few days, or ask someone else to look at it (preferably someone in your target audience, as this will provide the most accurate feedback).

This character is meant to have a happy expression, but in the left image he looks more serious. By shifting the character's weight onto his right foot, opening his mouth in a smile, raising his eyebrows, moving his hands outward, and raising his head, the character is made to look much happier.
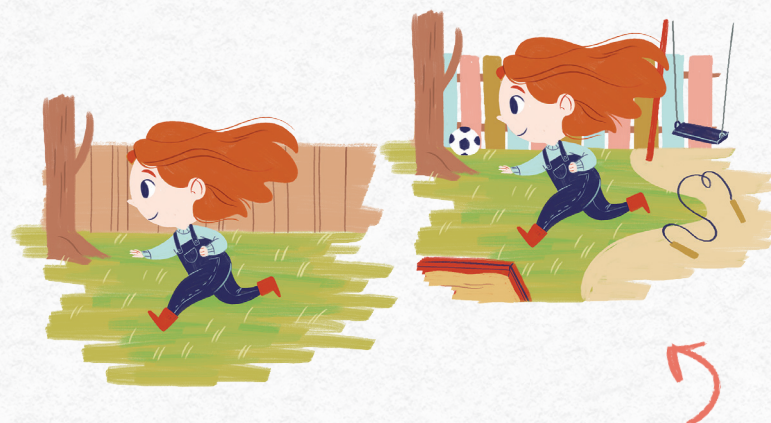
This character is meant to be running through a playground at the park, but there is nothing in the background of the left version that indicates it's a park. In the version on the right, however, there's a skipping rope, sandbox, swings, football, and more colorful fencing in the background, which are all items you might find in a playground.

This character is brushing her teeth, but the version on the left looks awkward and unrealistic. The version on the right looks more realistic as her arm is raised horizontally, her expression is more intense, as if she's really scrubbing her teeth, and there is more foam around her mouth.

ILLUSTRATING AN ONGOING NARRATIVE

Illustrating an ongoing narrative is very different to illustrating a single illustration. Each illustration needs to tie into the next, following the story of the main character or group of characters over the course of the narrative. There are therefore various stages of development you need to work through in order to achieve this.

Before you start, set aside some time to carefully read through the narrative and decide how you are going to interpret it in your illustrations, referring to any guidance the writer or publisher has provided. This will then lead into picture planning, where you create thumbnail sketches to explore ideas for your illustrations and character designs, and produce a page plan (see page 20) to work out the staging and pacing of the story. It's important to keep continuity in mind while working through these stages, considering how you can maintain it throughout your illustrations. To demonstrate these stages, we will be following the story of Arthur the fox as he goes on an adventure.

INTERPRETING A STORY

Start by familiarizing yourself with the story and consider how you are going to interpret it in your artwork. This requires a little more thought when illustrating a story written by someone else, rather than one you have written yourself, so it's essential to spend some time exploring how you will draw out the key message and most important aspects of their story.

If possible, the easiest way to do this is to talk to the writer and find out the message they want you to convey in your illustrations. They will often have a good idea of how they want their characters to look and the sort of message and tone they want the book to have. Plus, they should be able to provide you with great insight into their story. From personal experience, writers are almost always open to the illustrator's input and ideas, and sometimes the illustrator can present an interpretation the writer hadn't initially considered. Conversation with the writer can make this stage much more collaborative.

However, direct contact with the writer isn't always possible and sometimes the only contact you have is with the writer's publisher, meaning you will have to draw out your own interpretation of the story. To do this you will need to think about all the characters and their personalities, and how you can bring them to life through their designs. You also need to unpack what the story is about, the situations the characters experience, and any lessons they subsequently learn. How can you show this flowing narrative and character growth in your work?

The best way to do this is to pick out key moments from the plot to summarize what happens. For example, if you look at the illustration on the right-hand side of this page you will see the key points of Arthur's story.

Read the story through carefully and consider which key story moments you will choose to illustrate.

Arthur embarks on an adventure to his grandfather's house

He meets two friends on the way

As night draws in, they see the light coming from his grandfather's house

They notice something is wrong – there's a thief in Arthur's grandfather's house!

They hatch a plan to rescue Arthur's grandfather

They execute the plan and the thief escapes

Everyone is happy and they finally get some rest

PICTURE PLANNING

After you have considered how you're going to interpret the story, you can start planning the spreads. This stage lets you dive in and get all the ideas that have been building up inside your mind down on paper and explore where they will go. It's important to work through this stage in order to ascertain which of your ideas will work on paper, and which will not.

This section will follow the story of Arthur the fox, exploring the stages below as we plan his adventure:

- Thumbnailing
- Creating characters
- Considering the page plan
- Staging and pacing
- Continuity

"THUMBNAILS ALLOW YOU TO QUICKLY EXPLORE LOTS OF IDEAS BEFORE NARROWING THESE DOWN TO THE ONES THAT WORK BEST"

THUMBNAILING

Thumbnailing is a good place to begin when planning a picture book. Start by picking out the key moments in the story, then create lots of small, rough ideas. Thumbnails allow you to quickly explore lots of ideas before narrowing these down to the ones that work best, which you can then explore on a larger scale later on. All illustrations should start with a thumbnail sketch, even if it's just a single illustration.

These thumbnails explore different ideas for the spread where the friends see Arthur's grandfather's house in the distance. It's important to experiment with different compositions and character positions to make sure the image is readable. The first and third thumbnails are the most successful.
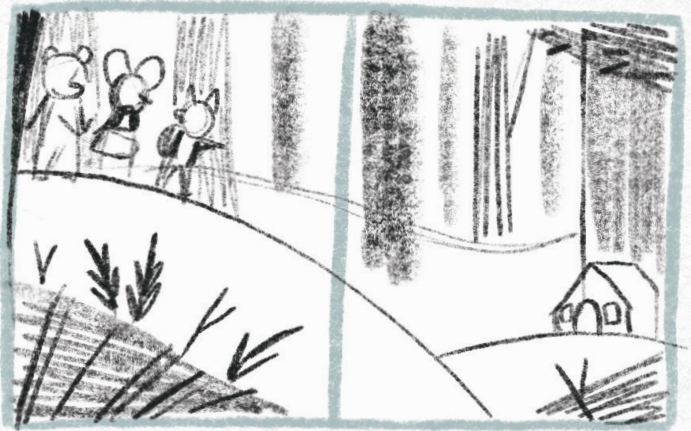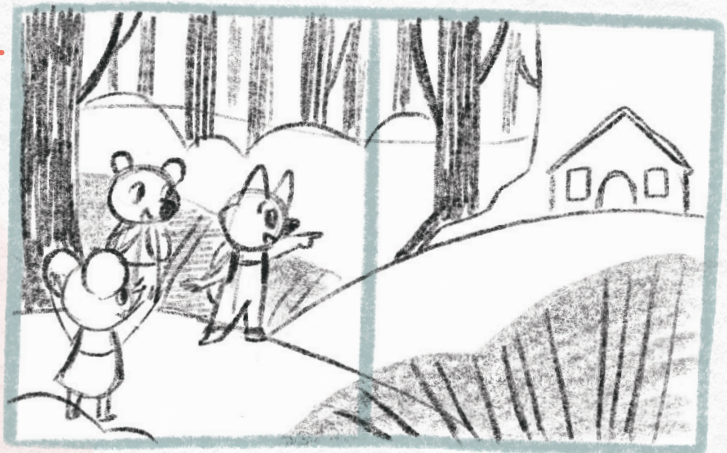
CREATING CHARACTERS

While thumbnailing, start to think about the characters and sketch out ideas for how you want them to look. It's important to consider their personalities and how you can reflect them in the characters' designs. For example, Arthur likes to wander around and embark on little adventures, making friends along the way. His outfit and design should therefore help to convey this. Arthur's grandfather, however, is much older and likes sitting cozily by the fire in his favorite armchair, making his character design significantly different to Arthur's. Similarly, the thief who breaks into Arthur's grandfather's house needs to look unfriendly and thief-like.

After trying out different outfit designs, you can then start to explore how the characters will look when they react to different situations and feelings. Consider how their body language will change with different emotions. As the characters in Arthur's story are all animals, think about how their animalistic facial features will move with their mood.

When creating a character, start with a rough sketch or concept, refine the lines and design, choose the colors, and then polish the final design.

Arthur is wearing dungarees, as these seem most fitting to his playful character. The big backpack he carries is full of supplies to help him on his adventures.
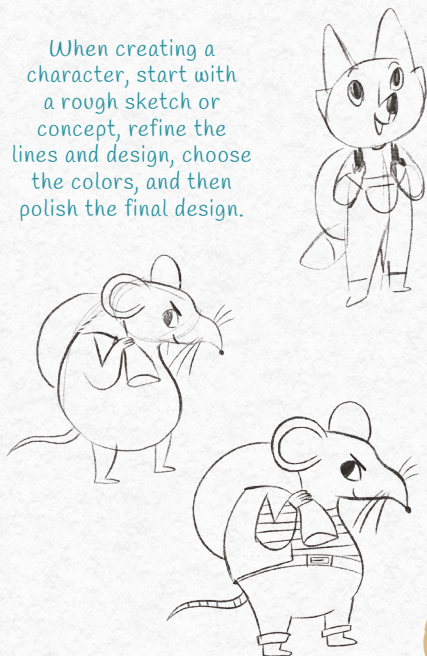
The thief needs to look unfriendly, sly, and thief-like, so he has pointed facial features, rough clothes, and a giant sack on his back. The curved shape of his ears and nose tone down his wicked character, ensuring he's still age-appropriate for the reader.

When designing characters, remember that you will have to draw them multiple times over the course of approximately 32 pages (see page 20). Make sure you know their designs and personalities inside out to ensure their designs are consistent throughout. Draw your character as many times as you can, with different poses and expressions, to help you get to know them.

CONSIDERING THE PAGE PLAN

Creating a sample page plan is a crucial stage in illustrating a picture book, as it allows you to plan out the flow of the narrative and work out where the key moments need to be. The typical paperback picture book is generally 32 pages, but different publishers use different book formats, and different ways of arranging their pages. It's important to ensure you fully understand what is required before you begin. A standard layout might look something like this:

Page 1
Half title page – a right-hand page featuring just the story title.

Page 2
Imprint page – a left-hand page featuring the publisher's imprint and copyright information.

Page 3
Full title page – a right-hand page showing an image from the story, the title, and the publisher's logo.

Pages 4–32
The story, ending on a single left-hand page.
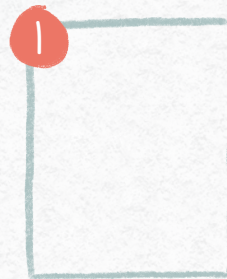
HALF TITLE PAGE
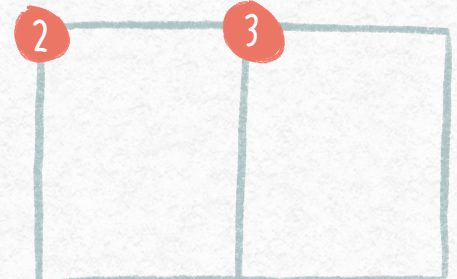
IMPRINT PAGE   FULL TITLE PAGE

HE HEARS RUSTLING IN THE TREE – SINGLE PAGE

MEETS HIS FRIEND, ED – VIGNETTE
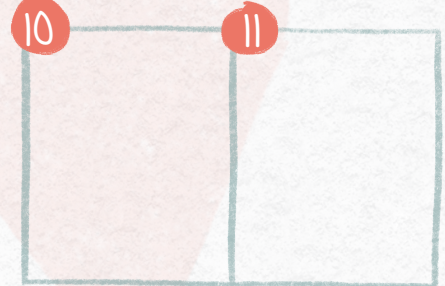
TELLS ED ABOUT GRANDFATHER'S TEA & CAKE

THEY TRAVEL ON TOGETHER
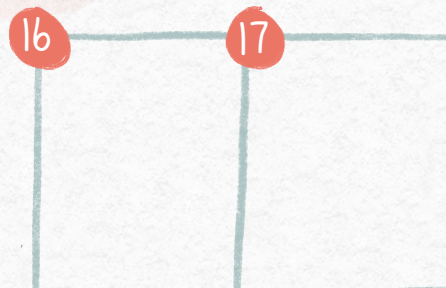
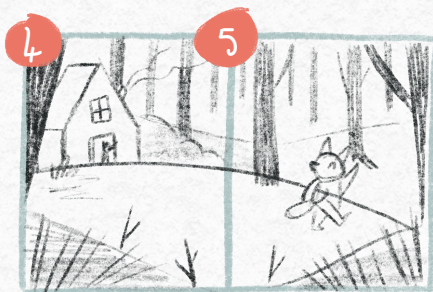THEY TRAVEL ON TOGETHER – SERIES OF VIGNETTES
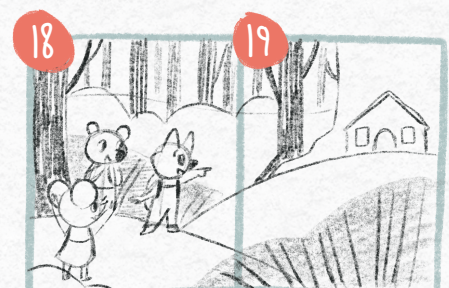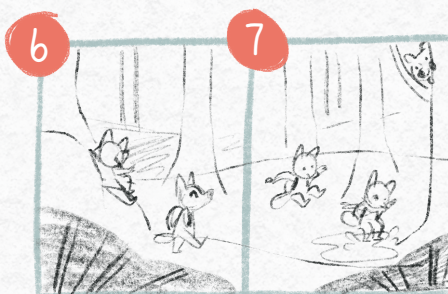
THEY SEE A DISTANT LIGHT – DOUBLE-PAGE SPREAD
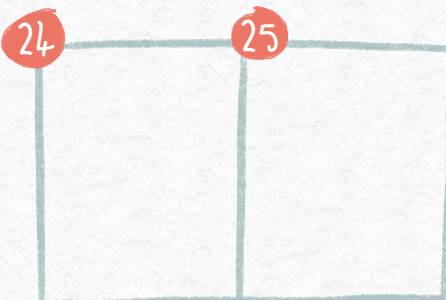
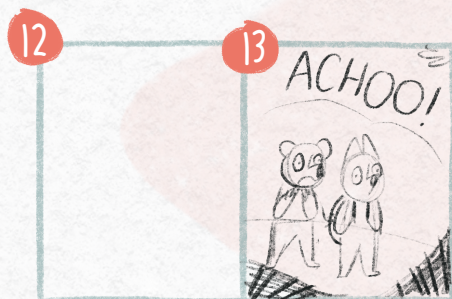THEY SNEAK INSIDE THE HOUSE   AND GET READY...

THEY EXECUTE THE PLAN – DOUBLE-PAGE SPREAD

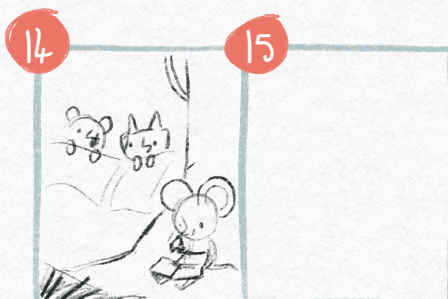ARTHUR LEAVES –
DOUBLE–PAGE SPREAD
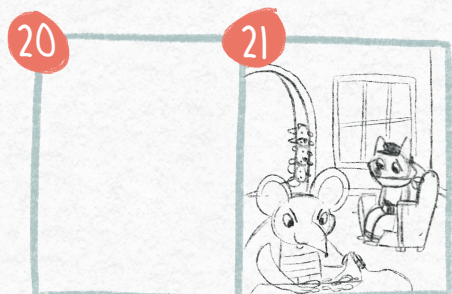
HE ADVENTURES THROUGH THE
WOODS – DOUBLE–PAGE SPREAD

THEY HEAR A LOUD
NOISE – SINGLE
PAGE

THEY FIND ELLA –
SINGLE PAGE
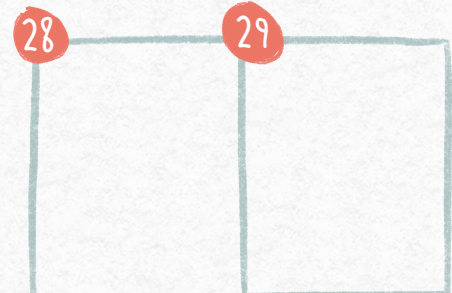
THEY TELL HER ABOUT TEA & CAKE

Creating a flat-plan
layout helps you to
work out where the
key moments need to
be, make sure the flow
and pacing of the story
works, and visualize
the book as a whole.

THEY SEE
SOMETHING IS
WRONG

AND SEE THE
THIEF – SINGLE
PAGE

THEY MAKE A PLAN –
DOUBLE–PAGE SPREAD

THEY SCARE
THE THIEF

WHO ESCAPES
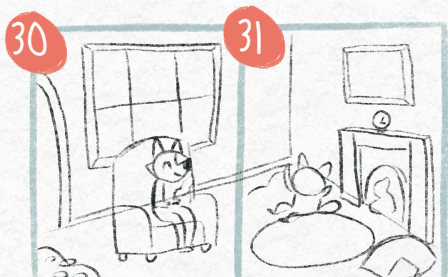
THEY CELEBRATE WITH TEA &
CAKE – DOUBLE–PAGE SPREAD

FINAL PAGE OF THE
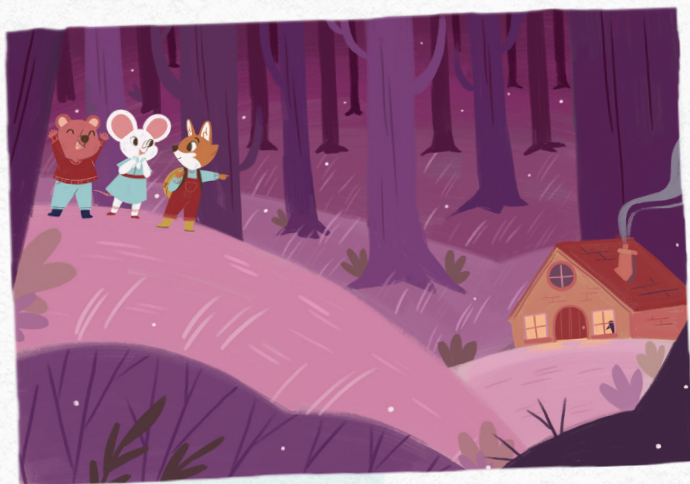STORY (SINGLE PAGE)

STAGING AND PACING

Next you need to consider the staging and pacing of your illustrations. This refers to the flow and pacing of the narrative and how the illustrations work with it. The spreads will be busier in some parts and quieter in others, depending on what is happening in the story.

Before you can do this, it's important to understand the different types of illustrations and spreads found in a picture book:

- Double-page spread: this is artwork that covers two entire pages, extending to the very edge of the paper (referred to as "full bleed", as the image bleeds right up to the edges of the paper).

- Single page: this artwork is just one page, again extending to the very edge of the paper.

- Vignette/spot illustration: this is a small illustration that "floats" on the page with a small or minimal background.

Including a mix of double-page spreads, single page illustrations, and spot illustrations throughout your picture book will help capture the pacing of the story, as each can be useful for portraying different aspects of the story.

This spread has a single page illustration on the left page, and a vignette on the right page. These pages are much less detail-oriented and are useful for showing character moments and action scenes.

For example, the opening spread is typically a double-page spread to introduce the setting and characters. This is then followed by a mix of single page illustrations, double-page spreads, and vignettes. Double-page spreads are great for setting the scene, but they are also good for capturing key moments or introducing a new setting. While they are generally quite slow-paced in terms of the narrative, they can be filled with lots of detail to keep the reader interested, making them look quite busy.

Vignettes/spot illustrations are useful for honing in on a particular character interaction or emotion, or showing a series of rapid actions. They make the page appear less cluttered and therefore break up the busy feel created by double-page spreads. An entire double-page spread of vignettes can look great, depending on the pace you want to convey, as can a single page of vignettes next to a full-bleed single page illustration.

This double-page spread (developed from one of the earlier thumbnails) depicts Arthur and his friends as they find his grandfather's house. Spreads like these are great for setting the scene, but remember not to put important details in or near to the gutter.

With single pages and double-page spreads it's important to be aware of the gutter, which is the dip where the spine sits down the middle of the spread. Avoid including important details too close to the spine to ensure they don't get lost in the gutter. Creating a template of the spread, with the spine drawn down the middle, will help avoid this issue, as will creating a dummy book from the page plan you created earlier. A dummy book is a mock-up that is the correct size and number of pages, containing draft spreads to show how the artwork and text looks once laid out. It will make it much easier for you to visualize how your picture book will look in print to help make sure the pacing is right.

CONTINUITY

While working through these stages, it's crucial to keep continuity in mind. Children will read picture books with their parents, so the books need to be visually captivating for both parent and child. They might read through the same selection of picture books each night before bed, looking at the illustrations and absorbing the details and characters, which will make it easy for them to spot inconsistencies. As an illustrator, it's essential you make sure your character designs and backgrounds are consistent throughout the book to avoid any confusion.

The best way to ensure you avoid inconsistencies is to keep to one simple yet contrasting color palette throughout the book. You should also spend some time practicing drawing your characters from all angles, plus drawing each background numerous times, becoming familiar with the items found there and their positioning in each scene. Try to visualize the characters as actual people, and the backgrounds as places that actually exist, getting to know them and what they look like. As you move through the book, refer back to previous spreads to make sure the illustration you're currently looking at matches the previous illustrations of the same or a similar scene. If a character is wearing a stripy t-shirt, take note of how many stripes their t-shirt has and make sure you draw the correct number of stripes each time you draw the character.

This is Arthur's mouse friend. In the left design she is wearing a short-sleeved dress, little frilled socks, and has a ribbon around her waist.

In the right design, the dress is long-sleeved and there is no ribbon or socks. Ensure your character designs are consistent down to the last detail.
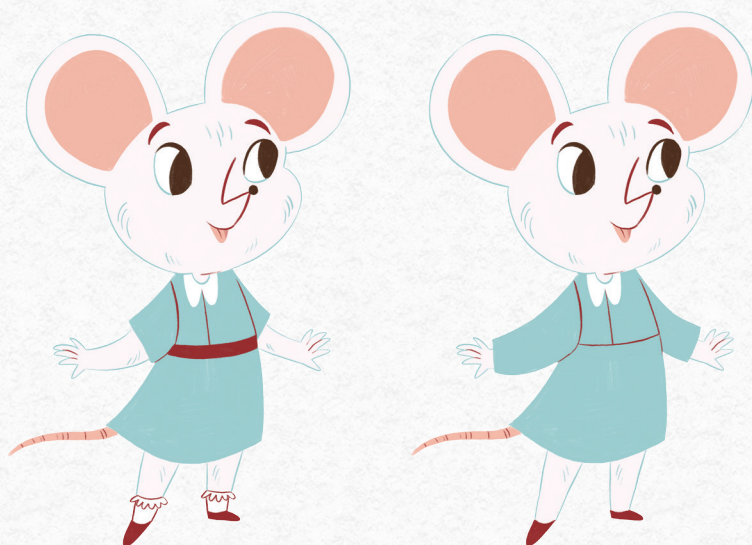
This is Arthur's grandfather's house. In the left image there is a round upper window and a crooked chimney, whereas the right image shows a rectangular window and a straight chimney. These small details should be remembered and included correctly w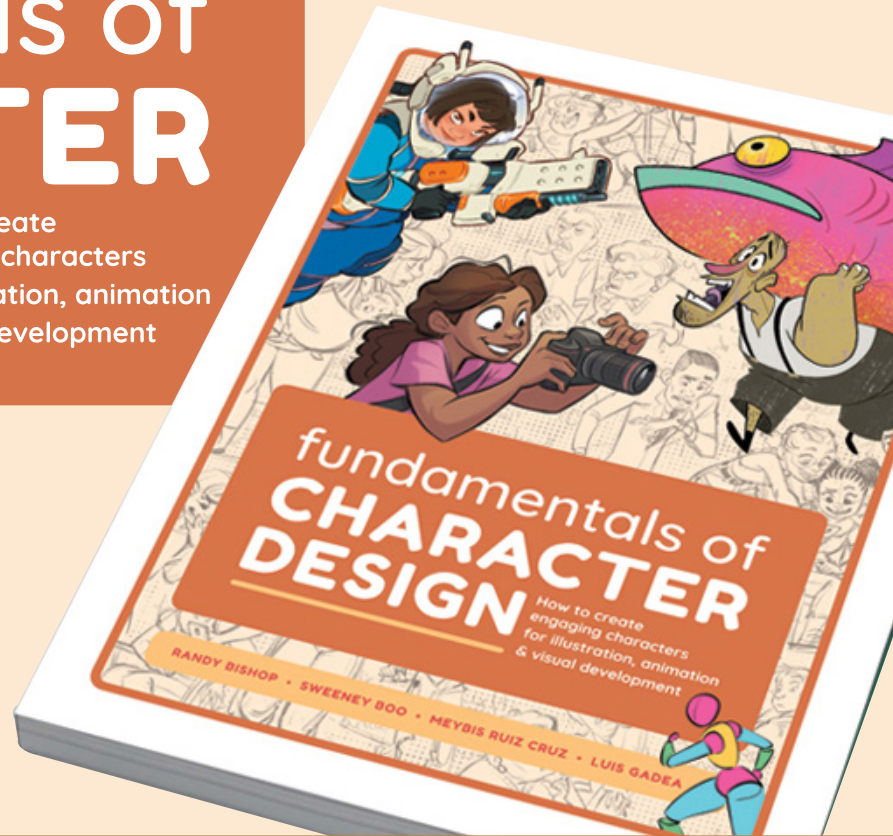henever the house or scene is drawn.