

THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO

WORKING WITH A CHILDREN'S BOOK ILLUSTRATOR

A practical guide for authors, publishers and creative teams

**From manuscript to finished book: what to prepare,
what happens during the process, and what
“print-ready” really means.**

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Illustration · Character Development · Visual Storytelling · Book Design · Production

What should you prepare before illustration begins?

You do not need to have every visual decision figured out before contacting an illustrator. A good illustrator can help develop the visual direction with you.

THE MOST USEFUL THINGS TO HAVE

- Manuscript — ideally the complete text, even if it may still receive small edits.
- Target age — for example 3-5, 4-8, or early reader.
- Approximate page count — picture books are often planned around a specific page structure.
- Publishing plan — traditional publisher, self-publishing, KDP, IngramSpark, or another route.
- Visual references — examples of mood, character feeling, environments or books you admire.
- Deadline — especially if the book is tied to a launch, event, Kickstarter or printing date.

WHAT YOU DON'T NEED TO HAVE

- Finished character designs.
- A completed storyboard.
- Final page layouts.
- A finished cover.
- Print-ready files.

Those can be developed as part of the creative process. The earlier the illustrator is involved, the more effectively the visual language can support the story.

TIP

Send the illustrator the whole story, not just a few favorite pages. Picture-book illustration depends on pacing, page turns and the emotional arc of the entire book.

Pages, spreads & story structure

A picture book is not simply a collection of individual illustrations. The images work together across the whole book.

A TYPICAL VISUAL WORKFLOW

01	MANUSCRIPT	Story, text, target age, publishing goals
02	CHARACTERS	Character design, expressions, poses and personality
03	STORYBOARD	Thumbnail planning, page turns, pacing and composition
04	SKETCHES	Detailed page-by-page visual development
05	FINAL ART	Finished illustrations and consistent visual world
06	BOOK DESIGN	Typography, text placement, interior layout and cover
07	FINAL FILES	Production checks and publishing-ready PDFs

WHAT IS A STORYBOARD?

A storyboard is a small-scale plan of the entire book. It lets the illustrator see the rhythm of the story before spending time on final artwork. It is where page turns, visual repetition, quiet moments, action and the overall flow can be tested.

WHAT IS A SPREAD?

A spread is the two facing pages a reader sees together. For picture books, spreads are especially important because the composition can guide the reader across both pages and create a visual moment or reveal.

Think of the storyboard as the map and the final illustrations as the finished journey.

Why character development matters

A strong picture-book character needs to remain recognizable while moving, changing emotion and interacting with the world around them.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT CAN INCLUDE

- Basic shape and silhouette
- Front / side / back views
- Expressions and emotional range
- Poses and movement
- Scale and relationships with other characters
- Clothing, props and recurring visual details
- Environment and world-building

The goal is not to create one beautiful character drawing. The goal is to create a character that can carry an entire story.

REVISIONS: WHAT SHOULD YOU EXPECT?

Revisions are a normal part of professional book illustration. The exact number depends on the agreement, but a clear milestone system keeps revisions useful and prevents the project from becoming open-ended.

A practical structure is:

- Visual direction — agree on the overall style and character direction.
- Storyboard / roughs — resolve composition and storytelling before final art.
- Final artwork — polish details and make agreed corrections.

The earlier a change is made, the easier it usually is. This is why sketch approval is so important.

The technical words made simple

You don't need to become a print technician. But understanding a few basic terms makes communication with your illustrator much easier.

BLEED

Bleed is the extra artwork that extends beyond the final trim edge. It prevents unwanted white edges if the printed sheet shifts slightly during trimming. KDP currently specifies 0.125 in (3.2 mm) bleed for interiors that use bleed, while IngramSpark generally specifies 0.125 in (3 mm) on the top, bottom and outside edges of interior pages. Exact requirements depend on the format and platform.

CMYK

CMYK stands for Cyan, Magenta, Yellow and Key/Black. It is the color model used for most conventional print production. Screen colors are often displayed in RGB, so colors can look different once printed. Always check the current printer's requirements before final export.

TEXT PLACEMENT

Text should be treated as part of the page composition, not simply dropped on top of finished artwork. The illustrator/designer considers readability, contrast, safe areas, page turns and the visual balance between words and image.

SAFE AREA

Keep important text and details away from the trim and binding area. IngramSpark currently recommends at least 0.5 in (13 mm) inside the trim for color interiors. Platform-specific templates should always take priority.

IMPORTANT

Print specifications change by platform, trim size, binding and book type. Treat these numbers as a starting point — not a universal template.

What does “print-ready PDF” mean?

A print-ready PDF is a final file prepared according to the printer or publishing platform's specifications. It is not simply a PDF exported from a design program.

A PROFESSIONAL FINAL FILE MAY INCLUDE

- Correct trim size and bleed
- Correct page order and page count
- Correct color setup for the printer
- High-resolution artwork
- Embedded fonts where required
- Safe text placement
- Correct cover dimensions and spine calculation
- Separate interior and cover PDFs when required
- No unnecessary crop or registration marks when the platform prohibits them

KDP BASICS

KDP supports print-ready PDFs for fixed-format interiors. Its current guidance says artwork intended to reach the edge should extend 0.125 in (3.2 mm) beyond the trim edge. Cover files also require bleed. Exact settings depend on the book format and trim size.

INGRAMSPARK BASICS

IngramSpark currently requires the interior and cover as separate PDFs, recommends 300 ppi for images, and specifies CMYK for color print files. Its current guidelines generally use 0.125 in (3 mm) bleed for the outer edges of interior pages and 0.125 in on covers, with special rules for certain hardcover formats.

The safest workflow is to download the current template and file requirements for the exact book before final export.

A simple checklist for authors

☐	Story	Complete manuscript + target age
☐	Creative brief	References, mood, audience, goals
☐	Book format	Trim size, orientation, binding, page count
☐	Characters	Main characters and key relationships
☐	Storyboard	Full-book thumbnail plan
☐	Sketch approval	Composition, pacing and text placement
☐	Final art	Final illustrations + consistency check
☐	Book design	Typography, layout, cover, spine, back cover
☐	Pre-flight	Bleed, margins, resolution, color, fonts
☐	Final PDFs	Interior + cover according to printer specs

A GOOD BOOK PROCESS REDUCES SURPRISES

The more decisions you make at the right stage, the fewer expensive changes you need later. Story decisions belong early. Composition belongs in the storyboard. Detail belongs in final art. Production checks belong before upload.

You don't need to manage every step alone. A complete visual partner can help connect the creative decisions with the final production requirements.

Need someone to handle the whole process?

Špela Kočnar

Children's Book Illustrator & Book Designer

Illustration · Character Development · Storyboarding · Typography · Layout · Cover Design · Print Preparation

The 10 terms worth knowing

TRIM SIZE	The final physical size of the printed page after trimming.
BLEED	Extra artwork extending beyond the trim edge so the finished page can print cleanly to the edge.
GUTTER	The inner area near the binding where text and important details need extra care.
STORYBOARD	A thumbnail plan showing how the story and images unfold across the whole book.
SPREAD	Two facing pages viewed together.
CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT	Visual exploration of a character's shape, expressions, poses, movement and personality.
TEXT PLACEMENT	Planning where words sit on the page so they remain readable and work with the illustration.
CMYK	A print-oriented color model using Cyan, Magenta, Yellow and Black.
PRINT-READY PDF	A final PDF prepared to the printer's exact technical specifications.
PRE-FLIGHT	The final technical check before a file is sent to print or uploaded to a publishing platform.

OFFICIAL RESOURCES

For current platform specifications, always check the official documentation before preparing final files.

Amazon KDP — Print book file setup and bleed requirements
kdp.amazon.com

IngramSpark — Print Book File Guidelines and File Creation Guide
ingramspark.com

READY TO TURN YOUR STORY INTO A BOOK?

Whether you already have a finished manuscript or are still developing the visual direction, the book can be built step by step — from the first character sketch to the final publishing-ready files.

LET'S MAKE A BOOK.