

Children's Book Writing Makes Me A Better Lawyer

By **Shaunna Bailey** (December 18, 2023)

In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys discuss how their unusual extracurricular activities enhance professional development, providing insights and pointers that translate to the office, courtroom and beyond. If you have a hobby you would like to write about, email expertanalysis@law360.com.

As a government contracts attorney, I spend my days helping clients navigate complex federal regulations, investigations and procurement queries. No detail can be overlooked when shaping best-in-class compliance programs or advocating for bet-the-company contract awards.

Yet over the past several years, I've also made time to develop a creative writing practice that led to the publication of a picture book I co-authored with my husband called "Black Beach: A Community, an Oil Spill, and the Origin of Earth Day."



Shaunna Bailey

Becoming a children's book author has opened doors to incredible new experiences of which I barely dared to dream — like seeing "Black Beach" published in multiple languages around the world and featured in Target's book club. But the process has also changed my life in a way I never imagined: It made me a better lawyer.

If that surprises you too, read on to see how publishing a book for kids made me a better legal writer, networker and public speaker.

Every Lawyer Needs Strong Writing Skills

For many of us, it may be hard to imagine there's much overlap between writing for an elementary-school-aged child and writing for a judge. In terms of feedback, that's probably true.

Realistically, no judge is ever going to give your brief a review of "1 million out of 100" — which can happen if you write for kids. But these seemingly disparate audiences share two important traits.

First, both children and judges have countless other priorities competing for their time — which means you better know where you're going and the best way to get there or risk losing their attention. Second, both are discerning reviewers who can easily see through a story that doesn't hold up. So, in order to make an impression on either of these audiences, it's essential to ensure your writing is both concise and compelling.

Picture book manuscripts are extremely short. Finished picture books are typically about 32 pages long and told with as few words as possible — never more than 1,000, ideally closer to 600. To create a complete and engaging story within these parameters, every word matters.

Picture book authors are constantly looking for clever ways to put words together,

communicate on multiple levels, and achieve deeper meaning. They must remove words, lines and even entire plot points that are not absolutely essential to the story.

And they must contend with many other variables such as the interplay between the words and illustrations, how to use page breaks to add tension or provide relief, and how to craft a conclusion that gives readers something to think about long after they've put the book back on the shelf.

A picture book author will revise their manuscript for months — sometimes years — until they arrive at a place where all the words combine to elevate the story to a level deemed worthy of publication.

The government procurement legal briefs I write have far greater word counts than picture books, but face similar constraints in the form of strict page limits or hypercondensed turnaround times.

While there are many differences between the strategies involved in spending a year poring over a 600-word picture book manuscript and a week drafting a 15,000-word legal brief supporting a novel cost accounting theory, I've found that in either situation the best writing always comes from rewriting. And by learning how to create a picture book manuscript, I've discovered that rewriting is my favorite part of the writing process.

So, whether you're writing a picture book or a brief, know that it's okay to write an imperfect first draft. Doing so means you get to rewrite it — to emphasize the most important parts and remove what's not essential in order to end up with the most efficiently and effectively written final product.

Make Networking More Personal

Not long after "Black Beach" came out — and at the suggestion of a trusted colleague — I took a leap and sent signed copies of the book to a handful of clients and contacts for Earth Day. Sharing my creative side with colleagues took me a little (or a lot) outside of my comfort zone, but I soon discovered my fears were unfounded.

The gifts went over well, with one client sending me draft sketches for a picture book he had been working on and another buying copies of the book for all of their employees with elementary-school-aged kids. Across the board, interactions like these can reinforce your investments in critical relationships and help grow connections on a more personal level.

In addition, my firm has been beyond supportive, with colleagues promoting the book on social media, during team meetings, and even at an industry event. I've also had the opportunity to present "Black Beach" at a number of our offices — both in-person and virtually — allowing me to network with attorneys and staff outside my normal sphere.

Talking about the book inside the office more often than not leads to discussions about my colleagues' interests and pursuits outside of work — again strengthening key personal connections and serving as a reminder that discussing personal interests at work can foster connections you may not otherwise have made.

Public Speaking Practice

Asking for questions from the audience is now my favorite part of public speaking — but I didn't always feel this way. In the past, the unscripted part of a public speaking event was a

significant source of worry for me. What if I didn't know the answer to someone's question? What if my mind went blank? What if no one asked any questions at all?

Writing and publishing a book for kids — and promoting it at schools and venues throughout the country — has completely flipped my outlook on presentations. Events for "Black Beach" generally consist of a short introduction, a book reading, a slide presentation on the actual events depicted in the book, and a Q&A session.

For each element up to the Q&A segment, I've found that repeatedly practicing what I'm planning to say in the days leading up to the event helps calm my anxiety and ensures I can hold the attention of a couple hundred kids and their teachers. This type of precise preparation has proven to be quite helpful.

At the same time, however, I've also discovered I'll never be able to anticipate all of the questions that might come from a crowd of kids. Each audience is different — from a library full of first graders at a Title I school to a tent full of children and adults at the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books — the largest literary event in the country.

Preparing for a Q&A session generally involves reviewing a fact sheet and knowing I can be adaptable if I get an unexpected question. This type of confidence-based preparation leads to more spontaneity and authenticity in my answers, and allows for meaningful follow-up after the event if I end up being totally stumped by a particular inquiry.

And the more I do this, the better I get at it. Effectively fielding curveball questions from curious 8-year-olds has built my confidence to know I'll be ready for whatever a client, a colleague, or an audience member throws my way.

Connecting the Dots

"Black Beach" is a story about a fictional character named Sam who experiences the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill and its connection to the first Earth Day. Because the narrative centers on Sam's reaction to an environmental disaster that ultimately helped kick-start the modern environmental movement, one of the core messages we share at school visits is: Just because something bad happens doesn't mean it has to be the end of the story.

The hope is that this simple theme helps empower readers, in the face of environmental disasters and climate anxiety, to stand up and help change the story. Interestingly enough, this theme can apply to many of the issues our clients face.

Whether it's a lost contract that leads to a successful bid protest or the discovery of an irregularity that leads to an enhanced compliance program, just because something bad happens doesn't mean it has to be the end of the story. Finding connections like these between your extracurricular creative pursuits and your law practice adds depth and meaning to your work and can increase your satisfaction with both.

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