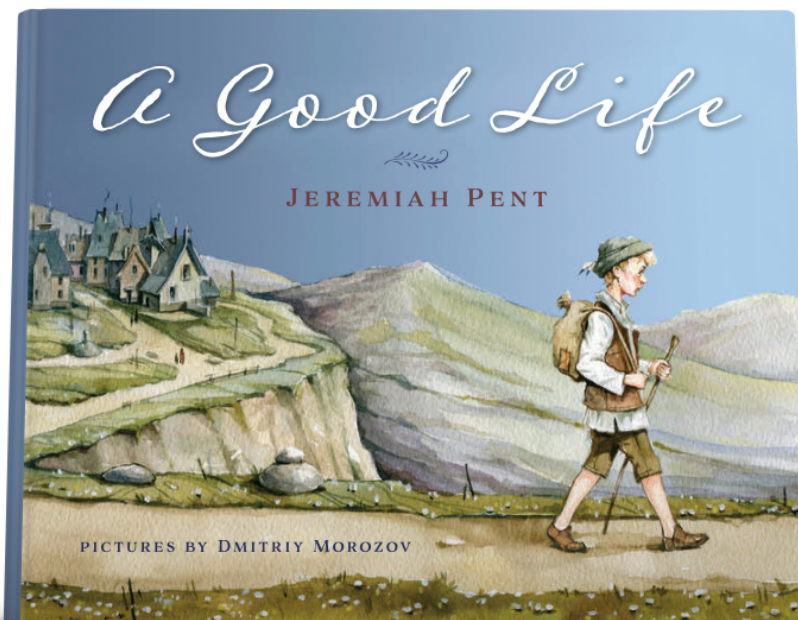




## 12 Steps to Hiring the Perfect Illustrator for Your Children's Book

by Jeremiah Pent



**L**et me strongly suggest you read this entire list of steps before you start your project. Doing so will give you a good overview of the entire process, which will help your project go smoothly and give you the best results. I'd also suggest you purchase a copy of my first children's book, *A Good Life* (pictured above and available on Amazon). *Why?* Because "a picture (or a concrete example) is worth a thousand words." What follows are the steps I took when I hired the watercolor artist Dmitry Morozov to work with me on the book. Dmitry did a great job, and I think the results speak for themselves. I've received scores of compliments on the beautiful artwork in the book, and I believe it's *a big part of what helped me reach #1 new release in multiple categories on Amazon* when I launched. The entire process went very smoothly and efficiently, and I think having the book in hand will help you think about your own project concretely (and, yes, of course I want you to buy it so I can sell more books, but that really is a secondary reason in this case). So, *here we go . . .*

1. **Write your story.** This seems obvious, but I find that some people will start looking for an illustrator before they've finished writing their story. Your project will run much more efficiently if your illustrator can read the final version of the text from the outset. This will also help you more easily agree on an artistic "vision" for the project before you start spending any money.

2. **Write your image “brief.”** Break your text into a series of “scenes” that you envision needing illustrations for. (Again, if you have my book, you can get a sense of how I did it.) This step is important for both you and the illustrator. It makes clear what illustrations you want from them and will make it much easier for them to give you a price or estimate for the project. For my project, I went into great detail about what I wanted for each illustrated scene in my book. I did Google searches for images of the types of clothing I wanted the characters to wear, the look of the architecture, and even some of the “props.” For example, I sent my illustrator a picture of a wooden ladle I wanted the farmer to be holding in one of the first scenes.

That said, I’m a detail guy, so don’t let what I did get overwhelming here, but do take it seriously. It helps clarify things in your own mind so that you can communicate clearly with your illustrator. They appreciate this, and it makes the project go much more smoothly.

*How should you structure your brief?* I simply typed the first section of my text I wanted an illustration for, put a line under it, then typed up a detailed description of what I wanted the scene associated with that text to look like. Once I finished the description of that scene, I typed the next piece of text that needed an image and wrote the next description I envisioned. Create a Google document for the brief and share it with your illustrator. This allows you both to make changes and comments on the same document.

3. **Think about book layout.** As you’re doing the above step, you’ll start wondering about things like, “Should I put my text on top of the illustrations or put the text on one page and an illustration on the facing page?” Good question. No “right” answer. I’ve seen beautiful books designed both ways, but you’ll need to decide this before you work with your illustrator. If you decide to put your text on top of the illustrations, this will allow the illustrator to structure the scene where there’s a place for the text that won’t interfere with the image elements. For my book mentioned above, I decided to put the text on one page by itself, and the image on the facing page ([see below for example](#)). I then designed the text pages where each had a beautiful initial capital letter that complemented the watercolor style of the illustrations. But, again, this is a personal preference. Look at several books you like and make a decision based on what you like.



4. **Think about book format and printing.** Yes, you need to think about this *now*. Why? Well, for one thing, you’re going to have to give your illustrator some proportions and dimensions for your images. If you choose a 9x9-inch book size, you’re going to need square images from them. If you choose 11x8.5 inches (the size I chose for *A Good Life*), you’re going to need rectangular images.

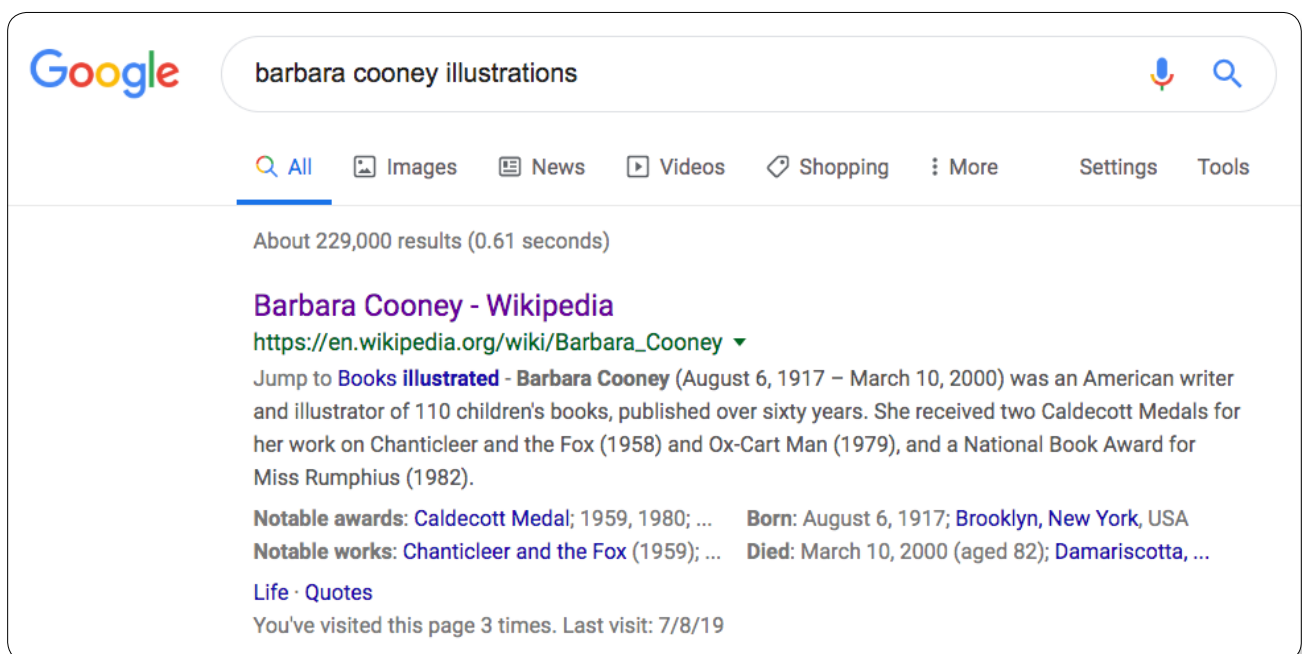
But this isn’t the only reason you need to think about this. The dimensions for your book will influence the number of pages, the perceived “value” of your book as compared to others in the marketplace, etc. I’d suggest you look on Amazon at some children’s books you like. Scroll down to

the publishing information about the book where you'll find the dimensions, number of pages, etc. Then look at the price of the book, and you'll have an idea of what you might be able to price your book for to be competitive.

Next, your dimensions will affect your options for printing the book at a cost that makes the economics work. If you're going to use a print-on-demand service (also known as "POD," which simply means your books are printed and bound one at a time as people order them), you need to make sure you're using a format that either Amazon or IngramSpark produce. That said, there are some formats that POD printers can produce, but the economics won't work out when you go to sell the book wholesale. *Choose the wrong size, and you'll end up having to sell your book at a loss to be "competitive,"* and that's not a great business model. Here's the link to the [IngramSpark POD sizes available](#). Here's a link to the [Amazon POD sizes available](#).

(As a side note, I consult authors on all of these complicated issues and offer other services as well, so feel free to reach out to me at [jp@patternmedia.us](mailto:jp@patternmedia.us) or visit my site at [PatternMedia.us](http://PatternMedia.us) if you need help.)

- 5. Find your desired style.** Spend some time looking at children's books and finding the style(s) of illustration that you like. If there's nothing exactly like what you're looking for, at least find something close so you can tell an illustrator, "I want it to look like this, except X." If you find an illustrator of a published book who's still alive and working, start by contacting them directly. If they're well-known and successful, they might be out of your budget range, but it's always worth a try to inquire about pricing. If you can't afford them, you can at least use their name and examples of their style to educate other illustrators as to your desired look.
- 6. Collect representative images.** In order to share your desired style with an illustrator, either snap some pictures of the artwork you like from actual books or search the web for digital examples of the illustrator's work. For example, type "Barbara Cooney illustrations" in Google. Click on the "Images" link once the results appear (see screenshot below). Click on any good representative images, which will show them at full size. Right-click (Windows) or Control-Click (Mac) on the full-size image to save it, and choose, "Save image as...". Choose a name for it, and save it to your hard drive. You'll provide these images to prospective illustrators to show them the styles you like.



7. **Research the medium.** This can be confusing if you have no knowledge of art or illustration, but don't panic. "Medium" is simply the type of paint or tools an illustrator uses to produce an image. They include things like oil, acrylic, gouache, or watercolor painting. There's also charcoal pencil, colored pencil, etc. If that's not enough, some illustrators used "mixed media," where they combine different medium. And these days, some illustrators prefer to work with computer software such as Adobe Photoshop or Adobe Illustrator to do their illustrations. Some illustrators can even use computer software to mimic physical painting. For children's books, I personally prefer physical mediums like acrylic, watercolor, etc., but that's just me. My book *A Good Life* was illustrated using traditional watercolors. That said, we also did some touchup, etc., using Adobe Photoshop after scanning the original painted images.

If you can't determine the medium you want or are confused by this whole subject, don't worry. It will help you be more specific about your desires and "artistic vision" for the project, but you'll pick up understanding on these things as you progress. If you can determine the medium you want at this point, you'll be able to use that information on the next step.



8. **Research illustrators on Behance and Upwork.** With the above steps completed, you're *now* ready to start looking for an illustrator. For finding quality illustrators, I highly recommend either [Behance.net](https://www.behance.net) or [Upwork.com](https://www.upwork.com). Some authors look for illustrators on sites like [fiverr.com](https://www.fiverr.com), but I don't recommend it. If you're serious about producing a quality children's book, look for a quality illustrator. You're much more likely to find one on Behance and Upwork.

Start by creating an account on each site so you can save "favorites" as you search and so you can contact illustrators on the sites once you find some you like. Next, armed with the knowledge you've gained in the first steps, go to the search feature of either site (usually represented by a magnifying glass symbol on the homepage), and type in "watercolor children's book" or simply "watercolor" or "acrylic" if you know the medium you want or "children's book" if you don't. You'll get a list of artists that illustrate in that medium or category. I like Behance a bit better at this point in the search because you'll immediately see examples of various illustrators' work in the search results. Upwork is a little more opaque here because you'll only see a list of illustrators who have indicated they do work associated with the search terms you've specified.

If you find a look you like on Behance, contact the illustrator and ask if they're currently accepting projects and what their basic rates are. If they're accepting new projects and their schedule and hourly rate work for you, send them your story and your descriptive brief and ask if they can give you an estimate or cost range for the project. Good, experienced illustrators can do so.

9. **Post a job on Upwork.** One nice feature of Upwork is the ability to post a job on the site and invite illustrators to apply for it. For example, for *A Good Life*, I posted something like: “Illustrator needed for a children’s book project. Looking for someone who can paint in the style of Barabara Cooney.” I then uploaded several samples of Cooney’s work based on the research I had done. You should have some sample illustrations to upload if you’ve done the steps above.

You’ll almost immediately get responses from interested illustrators. The nice thing about being clear in your description of the job is that you’ll weed out some (but not all) of the illustrators that aren’t well-suited for the project. But here’s where the need for some discernment is required. As potential illustrators respond to your posting (which you’ll be notified of via email), they’ll tell you why they can handle your project and usually share a link to see some extensive samples of their work. If you look at the work and there’s nothing like the style you’ve requested, I’d suggest declining their application. You’ll find some illustrators that claim to be able to copy almost any style. A few illustrators can copy other styles quite well, but others are just desperate for work (“starving artists”) and will claim to be able to do just about anything. You should be able to get a sense of their abilities and versatility by looking at their portfolio (samples of their work). If you don’t have any art “sensibility,” I’d highly suggest having someone with artistic sensibilities help you select the best candidates. (I help my clients with this step, so contact me at [jp@patternmedia.us](mailto:jp@patternmedia.us) if you need help.)



10. **Negotiate your project.** I could probably write a whole set of instructions just for this step, but I’ll try to summarize the possibilities in three possible scenarios:

**a. Full rights.** This is my preferred arrangement. It simply means that you’re paying the illustrator to produce art for you, and you want to own it entirely once you’ve paid them. I suspect a majority of illustrators don’t mind this. Some might charge a bit more, but I like it because it keeps things simple in the future. You can use the art any way you want. If the project involves physical paintings, I even get the physical paintings before the final payment. With this arrangement, the illustrator would technically even need to ask your permission to post the artwork in their online portfolio (which I am always happy to agree to).

**b. Limited rights.** This is where you agree to pay the requested fee for a limited amount of usage. It may mean you can only use the images for the printed version of your book but might need to pay extra for electronic versions, etc. Or it may mean you can use the images for a print run of a limited amount (say, the first 5000 copies), at which point you’d need to pay an additional fee for another print run, etc. There are endless possible variables on this theme. Some illustrators may require

it, but I don't prefer it if I can avoid it. It means ongoing payments, responsibilities, limitations, etc., and none of those three things feels great to me, but that's just me. You won't need to even talk about limited rights unless your illustrator requires it. I would always ask for full rights first, and they'll either agree or suggest their desired limitations at that point.

**c. Project partnership.** This is where an illustrator may charge less than usual (or nothing up front) with the hope of sharing in the profits of the book in the future. This is certainly an advantage for you in terms of initial cost, though probably a headache in the future in terms of accounting, payments, etc. Again, not my thing. And if I was an illustrator, I doubt I'd like this option either, unless maybe J.K. Rowling or someone of that caliber was pitching me on a project.



**11 Write up your agreement.** You can be as formal or as informal with this as you like, *but make sure you are very clear on what both of you expect.* One of the nice features of Upwork.com is that you're able to record all back-and-forth messages between you and the illustrator you hire, plus Upwork manages the whole payment process. You can break the project up into stages and agree on partial payments once each of the stages is completed.

For example, on *A Good Life*, I made an initial deposit of around \$1000. This started the project we had estimated would include between 24-28 images. The first stage was the "sketch" stage. The illustrator sketched each of the scenes in my descriptive brief for my approval. Once we agreed on the initial sketches, I made the second payment, which initiated the painting stage. Once the paintings were completed, I made another payment, and once I received all the original images in hand, I made the final payment.

The big benefit of using Upwork is that you have some security that you won't be taken advantage of if your illustrator doesn't perform as agreed. You also have the opportunity to rate your illustrator after the project, and many illustrators depend on Upwork for their next client, so they need to keep customers happy. Hiring an illustrator outside of a managed "social" system like Upwork doesn't give you that security. That said, Upwork charges you a markup on your payments (to see their current fees, [click here](#)). Don't be surprised if your illustrator asks you to cover those charges. This, of course, is also negotiable. I covered all the Upwork charges on my last project, but it would be reasonable to split them with your illustrator since both of you are benefitting from using Upwork.

12. **Get some experienced help if you need it.** Producing a great children's book, like most worthwhile things, takes a *lot* of work. And, in case you haven't noticed, there are a lot of poor quality children's books out there. I know because my wife and I have seven children, and it was all the bad books I've read to our children over the years that made me want to try my hand at creating one of the good ones.

*I've helped authors self-publish their books for over 25 years. I know the print-on-demand world well, have used printers throughout the US, and have also produced over \$10 million worth of products in China over the last decade. My company also builds author websites, manages book launches, and creates marketing funnels. We're a one-stop-shop for taking your book and message from concept to reality. I'd love to work with you on your project. I can shepherd you through the difficult process and help you avoid the pitfalls along the way. You can reach me at [jp@patternmedia.us](mailto:jp@patternmedia.us), or through my website at [PatternMedia.us](http://PatternMedia.us).*



### **A Final Word**

*You can do this.* Whether you need my help or not, I hope you'll take the artistic risk of producing your own children's book. You'll learn so much about yourself and the industry when you do, and, hopefully, you'll create something wonderful that can enrich the lives of children (and their parents) for years to come. *Here's to your success!* [Jeremiah Pent](#)



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