Things to consider when making an illustrated children's book for print

Primary for authors, illustrators and self-publishers

By Erik Istrup, May 28, 2019.

This article is about considerations when making a children's book with text and images. It is not about how to write and make illustrations, but the practical work of creating a beautiful book out of your hard work.

Tags: cover types, bindings, paper types, print methods, illustrations, margins, readability, e-book.

It is a good idea to check out what others have done and learn from them. At the end of the article you will find an explanation of some words used. Printing illustrations demands large image files in good quality, usually with a resolution of 300 dpi (dot per inch) or 600 dpi for vector graphics, but I will not go into this.

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Outer appearance

Depending on the amount of material, illustrations and text, you must consider page count, trim size and binding. You will choose white paper, if the illustrations are in colour to preserve the true colours or there is any white on them, because the printer does not print white. When you consider page count versus trim size, remember that thin books might not have space for a spine text. A book

with spine text is easier to find on a shelf or in a stack or the title may catch a potential buyers' eyes. Check with the printer for their limits on printing spine text. It is the binding tolerance; how precise the text will appear on the spine.

The printer usually limits the number of square and landscape trim sizes, but you may achieve it if you can select custom trim. Some trim sizes may be with paper only in crème others only in white.

Landscape format, gloss

Options with different page counts

Page count influences the thickness of the book, thus the outer appearance. To a degree, page count and trim sizes will influence each other, and a few extra blank pages can be added to the end of the book if needed, especially if you have few pages. This will make the book more stable. The printer usually adds one sheet (2 pages) for their internal information anyway. Page count must be dividable with two or four. Ask the printer and maybe add blank pages to the end if the printer does not.

Very few pages (4 - 28): Here you can choose hard pages of cardboard, maybe with spiral or ring spine. These are usually used for pictures only and to the youngest kids. Then there is a soft cover with saddle stitch (stampers), page count must be dividable with 4, max trim size about 8" x 8" (210 x 210 mm) or the book will be too floppy. Normally, there are too few pages for choosing a hard cover and glued soft cover, but some printers will bind as few as 18-20 pages (10 sheets). There will be no space for spine text.

Few pages (30 - 48): Saddle stitch, (glued) soft cover, hard cover. Do you have enough spine for spine text?

More pages (50 and up): (Glued) soft cover with spine text, hardcover will provide space for spine text and makes the book durable.

Saddle stitch or clued soft cover: The clued may prove to be more durable because the pages are connected all the way from top to bottom in the spine, while saddle stitch only attach pages in two places, especially the pages in the middle are vulnerable.
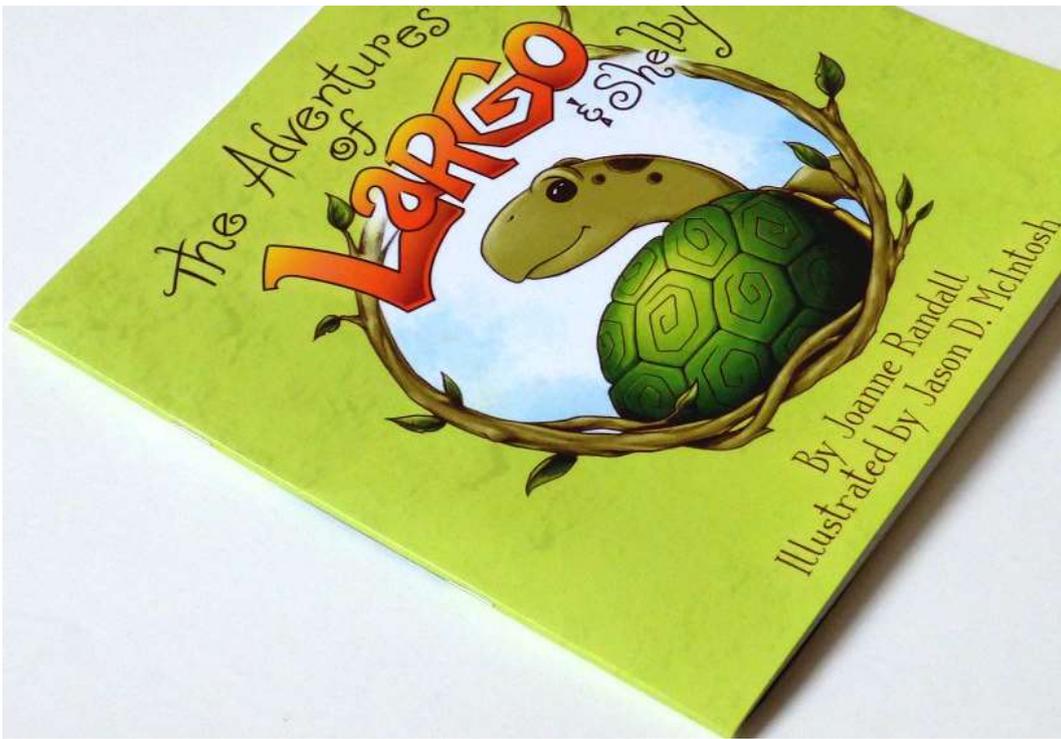
Saddle stitch, gloss (28 pages)
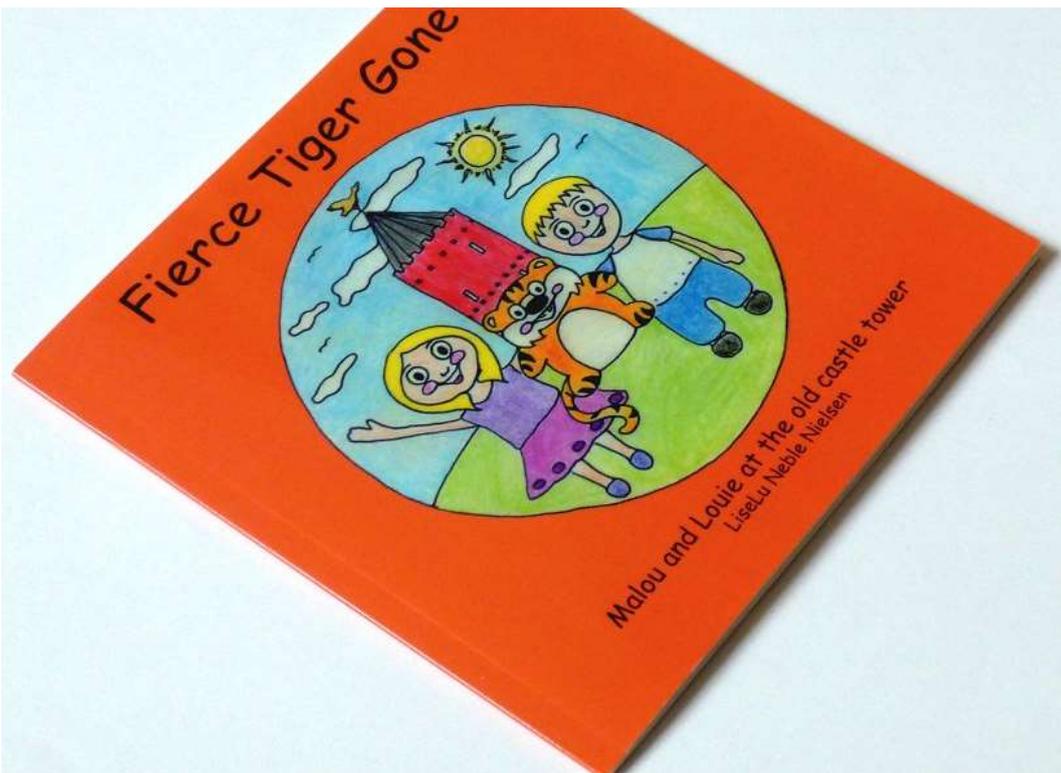
Glued soft cover, too thin (20 pages) for spine text, gloss cover

Soft cover with spine text, gloss cover
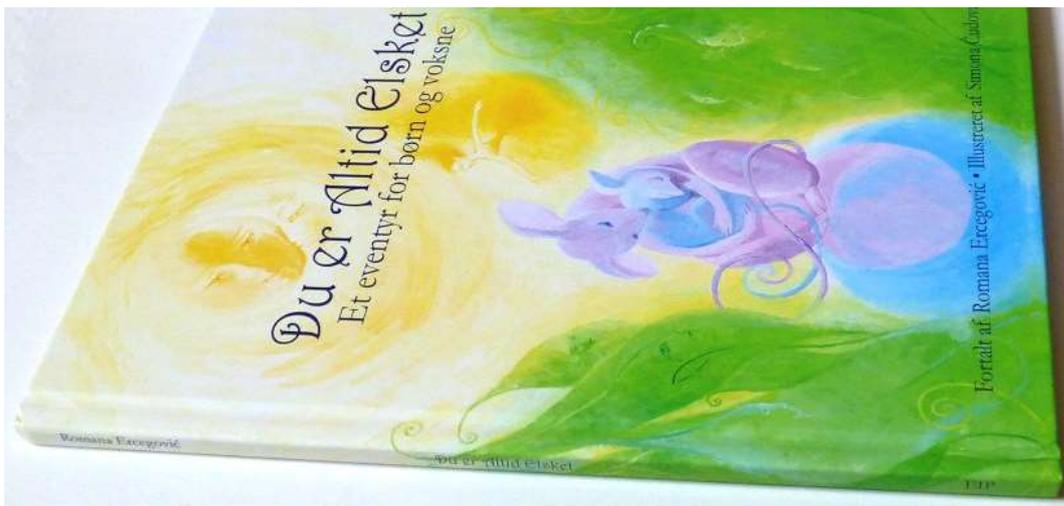
Hard cover (48 pages) with spine text, gloss cover

Cover finish

Gloss, matt or cloth (with or without jacket).

Cloth is dull and a book jacket will only last for a short time.

A matt cover shows fingerprints and other markings and may look dirty, but does not reflect light so the cover motive is easy to see.

A gloss cover is easy to wipe with a damp cloth, but reflects light that makes it a little harder to see the cover motive at certain angles.

Matt vs. gloss cover

Inner appearance

The choice of paper materials and appearance for the inside of the book is very important. It is here the reader and the spectator make their experiences. The arena.

Illustrations in colour or/and grey or mono. Many colours may overwhelm sensitive kids (explosion of colours). Someone may consider grey as dull.

There are some **print methods** like offset, laser (powder) or Ink-Jet. Offset is the most expensive printing method because it needs more preparation and used for larger print runs, the laser is easy to set up and is great for print-on-demand, Ink-Jet is cheaper that the other two methods, but you

may experience tiny white lines through the illustration because of blocked nuzzles. The printer cannot guarantee that this will not happen.

Always see your creation as the open book having a left and a right page, a spread.
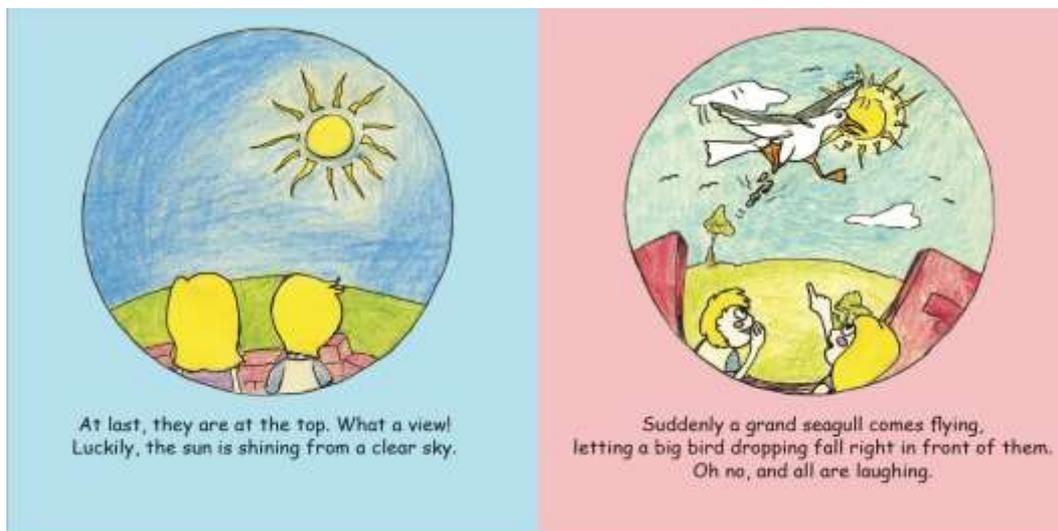

Colour interior

Black & white interior (hardcover)

Choosing the **paper** is a huge thing, because it is the backdrop of the story so to speak. Thickness, colour like crème or white, matt or gloss and to a less degree, texture. You may consider gloss and photo with offset print because the illustration will also be gloss, while 'laser print' has matt colours so the motives will be matt anyway and matt colours on gloss paper may look odd. Matt paper and matt print will make the pages easy to look at and read, because there are only mild light reflections. Normally you will not use cream paper, because everything white in your illustrations will be cream because the printer does not print white colour. Light colours will be problematic in general with crème paper because the crème colour influences how the eyes perceive the motive.

Should you separate the text and illustrations, or should the text be in the illustration and maybe cover part of the illustration or placed in a text bubble?
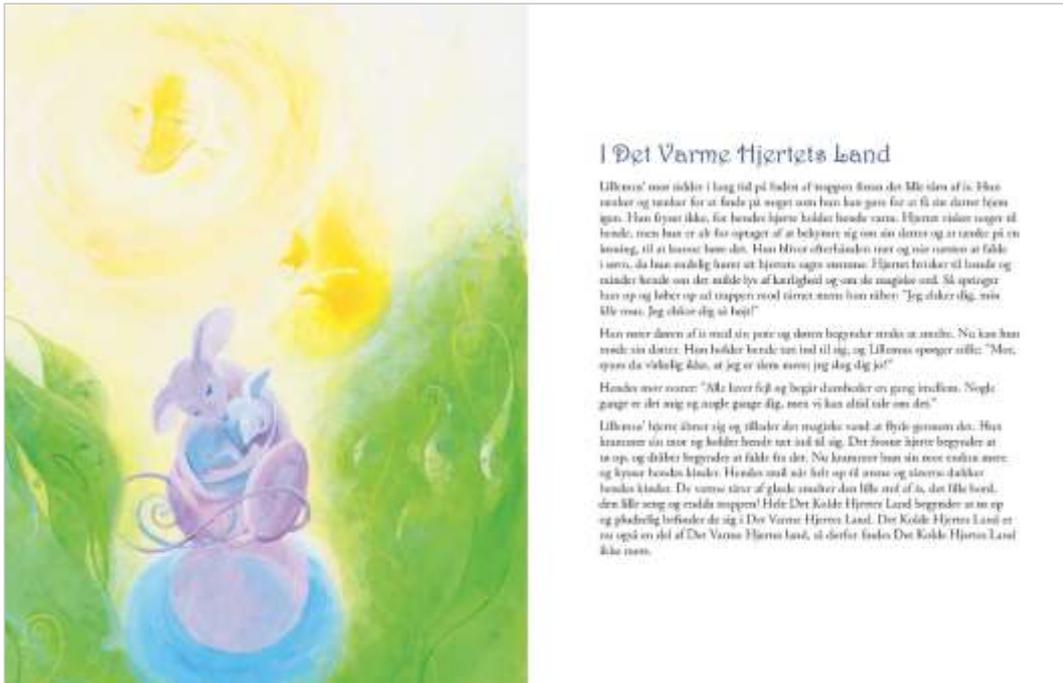
You may keep the illustration and text total separated, especially if you have much text. A way to do this is to have illustrations on even page numbers and text on odd pages. This way, the child may sit on the readers left side with the pictures and the reader will have free access to the text on the right side, without pointing fingers making it difficult to read.

At last, they are at the top. What a view!
Luckily, the sun is shining from a clear sky.
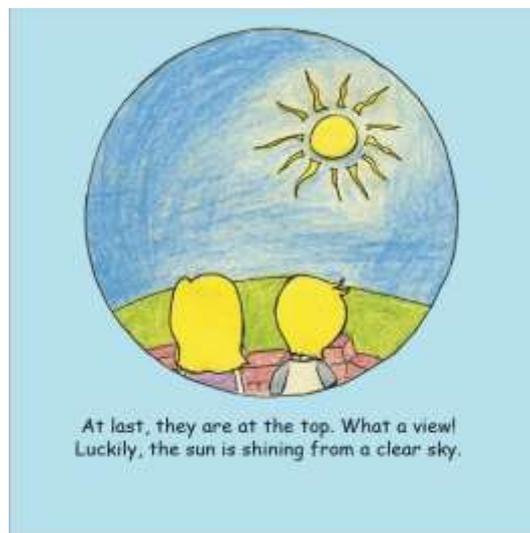
If you have little text, but feel it will disturb the illustration if put into it, you may place it outside the illustration, preferable below, so the reader can point at the text to show what word is being read.
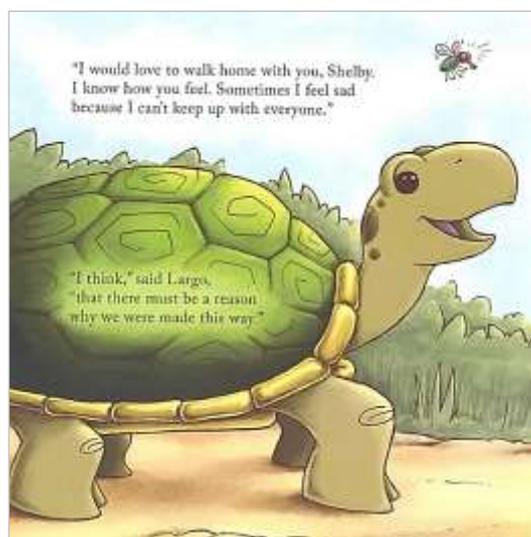
You may use an area with little difference in contrast intentionally prepared as the sky shown above, or a prepared area for the text can be the area on the turtle's shield as shown above.

Page numbers or not. You may show that "real" books have page numbers and use them for educational purposes, or you may consider if the page numbers will "disturb" the illustrations. Page numbers will be less in the way if placed in the lower outer corner.

Composition of illustrations and text

The illustrations

The illustrations may appear in colour, grey (different percentages of black) or mono (only 100 percent black). You may consider if you want many details or go for simplicity. Many details may overwhelm or present an opportunity for exploration and dialog.
You may choose margins or pictures to the edge. If pictures go to the edge, you must place a small bleed passed the trim to compensate for tolerances in the trim process. If pictures go all the way to the spine, the printer may want a small area kept clear from print called a slug.
Instead of a white margin you may consider a background colour. This will demand a bleed areal as mentioned above.

The text

Readability and flow. The reader should not be in doubt what text block comes next if there are more blocks of text on a page or spread. This is important if you expect young readers.
Margins. Inner margins, the margin close to the spine must not be too narrow. It will be to irritation if one must force the book open to read close to the spine. Outer margins must find a balance between being too wide and too narrow. The same goes for the top and bottom margins.
If the book uses background colours and coloured text, the contrast must be high enough to make it easy to read the text. Complementary colours may not be the best solution here. You could for example use a dark blue text on a light blue background. Dark text on a light background is easier to read and more relaxing for the eyes than light text on a dark background, so use it scarcely.

Words explained

Bleed: The area that a coloured background or an illustration reaches outside the trim area.

Creme paper: A yellowish paper, slightly structured which both gives fewer light reflections and contrast thus less hard for the eyes when reading.

Cloth cover: Is a hard cover with cloth wrap instead of the cover art.

Gloss cover: The cover has a shiny surface made with a coating or foil wrap.

Hard cover or case bound: A non-flexible cover made by thick cardboard at the front and rear, but not the spine and wrapped with cover art.

Matt cover: The cover has a mat, non-reflective surface made with a coating or foil wrap.

Mono colour (only 100 percent black): Everything that is printed on the paper is totally black, there are no shades of grey even not the illustrations.

Page count: The number of pages a book has, not sheets. This may not be the same as what the page numbers says. You could say, it is the number of sheets divided by two.

Saddle stitch (Stampers): The pages are fixed together with, usually, two metal stampers through the spine. The book is made of spread sheets that goes all the way from the left to the right.

Slug: Part of the inner margin that is slightly hidden close to the spine.

Soft cover or paperback: A flexible cover made of thin cardboard wrapped around the text block.

Spine text: The text you will find on the spine of the book. It will usually be the name of the author, the title of the book and maybe the publisher's name or logo.

Spine width: Are both used for the total thickness of all the pages and the total thickness of the book.

Spread: A left and a right page of a book when it is open. Instead of focusing on one page at the time, one can focus on both as a whole.

Trim size: The size of the pages, not the book if it is a hard cover.

Your book as an e-book?

Often you make an e-book at the same time as the printed book. If you just convert your printed book layout to an e-book, the result will probably not be satisfactory. You have no control of the media the book will be viewed on, many sizes, usually small, and with a wide range of abilities, so can your e-book fit them all? You may go for the non-flowable layout of the pdf-format or if possible non-flowable epub-format. You may also place illustration and text separately, text below the illustration even your printed book has the text incorporated in the illustration. You need to consider this BEFORE you make the illustrations.

✚ Pro: No production costs after initial development. Can be made interactive, but this limits the devices on which it can be used. You can use your printed book layout to generate a pdf format e-book, which has a fixed format like the printed book.

━ Con: Not for social interaction like enjoying a book together, because of small size and viewing angle of the readers. There is no possibility for spread pages. Some readers may show two pages at the time, but that might show up as odd/even and not even/odd as in the printed book. You may use flowable or non-flowable text to control pictures and text. You may see illustration and text separately. Text must be incorporated as part of the illustration if it is to be viewed at the same time, not a text per se, so the reader can't change text size.

Smartphone: Limit details because of small display.
E-readers: Some shows only black & white or grey scale.
Tablets: Tablets are better, but still has a small display.