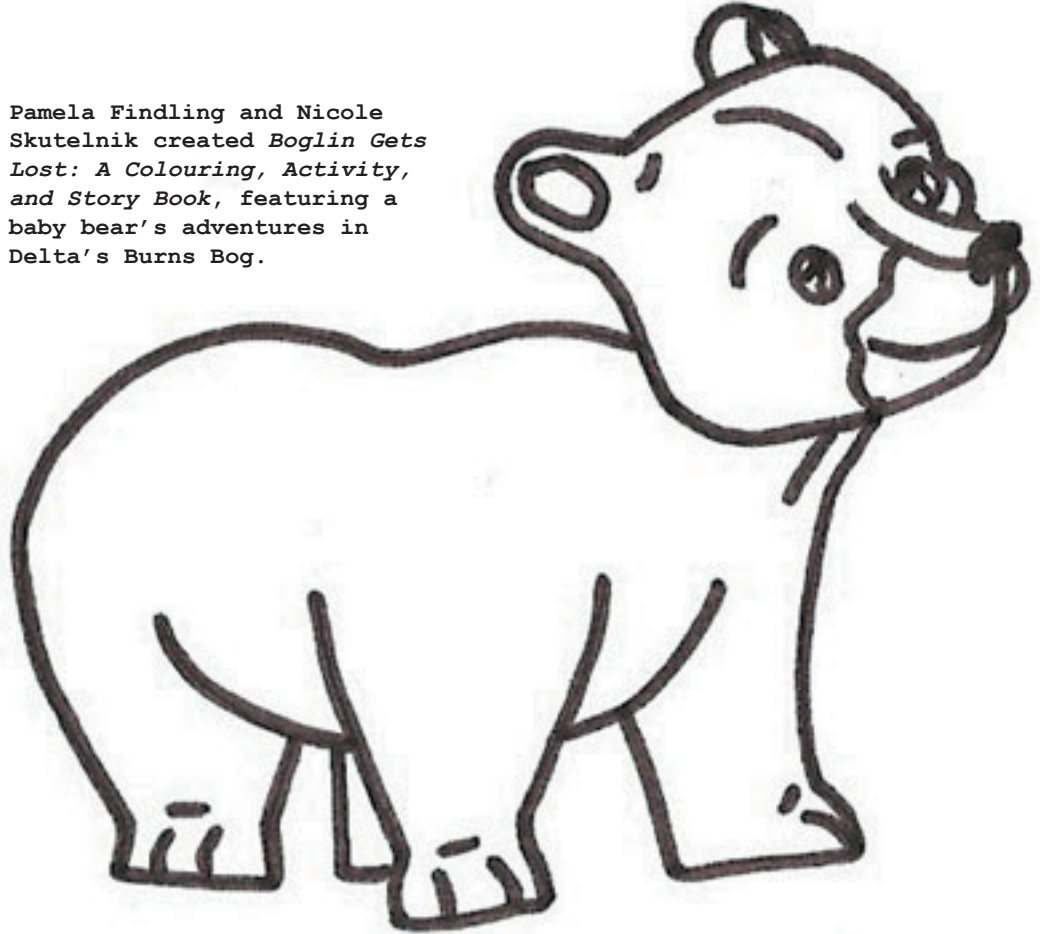




feedback makes for better books by nicole skutelnik

Pamela Findling and Nicole Skutelnik created *Boglin Gets Lost: A Colouring, Activity, and Story Book*, featuring a baby bear's adventures in Delta's Burns Bog.



WHOEVER SAYS IT'S EASY to write books for children has clearly never been published. Just because the books are short doesn't mean writing them is a one-day job. I learned this lesson during my internship at Burns Bog Conservation Society. My classmate Pamela Findling and I tackled two children's books, which I also illustrated.

Initially, we planned to finish each of the stories in one sitting, and that's exactly

what we did. Sure, I thought we'd need some copyediting here and proofreading there, but the stories were basically complete. Unfortunately, I overlooked the most essential step in writing for children: feedback.

Letting Go

Getting my mother's opinion on the stories was not enough. We needed feedback from all the potential readers, not just kids. In fact, children's books have the most diverse

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readership of all genres. We sought feedback from a local children's author, teachers, parents, librarians – all of whom are people who could potentially purchase the book – and, of course, children.

We received the same criticism from everyone: the books are too long. But how could we shorten the stories and maintain the characters' personalities? We'd lose description, humour, and our voices as writers. Well, we quickly learned that kids don't like description, don't understand our humour, and don't care about our voice.

Chickens and Bones

We were too attached to the original stories. But the moment we let go of our precious words and stripped the sentences in half, the stories came alive.

This process reminds me of dissecting a chicken. You've got to strip off the meat leaving only the bare bones. The same process applies to writing. The less meat left on the chicken, the cleaner it looks.

I read one of our bare-bones books to kids in a first-grade class. They were ecstatic. The students told me their favorite parts: some loved the characters, some loved the dialogue, and the rest loved the whole book.

Receiving feedback from those kids made me understand the importance of reader-centred writing. If you want to get published, you're not writing for yourself; you're writing for your readers.

Knowing your audience is essential. What is their reading level? What subject matter is appropriate for their age? What vocabulary is too difficult? Too easy? The questions are endless. But having your readers respond

so positively to your writing is the ultimate reward.

Simplicity Is Key

Children's book writing may seem like a useless craft in the grand scheme of writing talents. How could mastering such simple language help you improve your writing? Stop and think. Simplicity is the key to effective writing.

Whether you're a technical writer, a PR professional, or an editor, you strive to reduce clutter and make every word count. The same applies to children's writing. Kids have short attention spans and limited vocabulary. You're forced to strip your sentences to their bare bones. If this internship taught me one thing, it was this: don't get attached to your original draft. Just like in all forms of writing, revision is essential.

Copies of *Boglin Gets Lost: A Colouring, Activity, and Story Book* are available from the Burns Bog Conservation Society at www.burnsbog.org.

Find more *Inked* internship stories under Good Reads at www.douglas.bc.ca/pf.

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Nicole Skutelnik is a writer, editor, and designer who specializes in children's literature. In summer 2007, Nicole illustrated and co-wrote two children's story and educational activity books for the Burns Bog Conservation Society. She's currently writing two young adult novels and plans to write more books for children.

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