

DECEMBER 2017 BEHIND THE CURTAIN JOURNAL ENTRY *THE IMPORTANCE OF SUBTRACTION*

BY CHILDREN'S AUTHOR JENNIFER PHILLIPS

There's a quote out there in the Internet world that I've pinned and come back to periodically: Creativity is subtraction. Lately, I've found myself thinking of this often as I've revised picture book drafts.

I'm a wordy writer. I start with writing drafts that are way too long. Then I trim. And trim. And trim. I can't always see where I need to subtract without **someone's** fresh eyes to help me. But I'm okay subtracting.

How does subtracting unleash creativity?

- It leaves more to the imagination
- It removes distractions and helps you find the heart of your story or character or setting (or all of these)
- It can strengthen the impact
- It makes things simpler, which increases understanding and interest

I used to be an innovation manager in my day job. We were in constant pursuit of how to simplify things for our customers and teams. You provoke a **team's** thinking by asking them to give up something they don't think can be given up (a system feature, a process step, etc.). **That's** subtraction.

My best recent examples of subtraction in my picture book drafts involves the advice that pb writers give each other to "kill the parents." Sounds awful, I know. I always cringe. But **what's** meant, of course, is that parents or other grown-ups can easily become dominant characters when you need your story to remain child-focused. I have three manuscripts where I reluctantly, after much resistance, subtracted the parents completely from the stories. All three stories feel lighter and more successful because of this.

There's a place for strategically adding and thoughtfully replacing in our writing. But for now, be brave and go find something to subtract from one of your drafts!

And here's a [helpful video post](#) from K.M. Weiland about the need to simplify your story before you lose your readers.

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