

OLYMPIADS SCHOOL/GRADE 7 AND 8 WRITING/HANDOUT 5

Activity

In anticipation of Halloween, we will be writing a horror story. Horror doesn't always have to contain gore, zombies, or jump scares. It can be subtle, like Rodrigo Blaas's animated short film, "Alma." Watch it, and discuss the elements of horror in it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tECaYQ1AzkM>

How to Write a Horror Story

(from <http://www.wikihow.com/Write-a-Horror-Story>)

Horror stories can be as fun to write as they are to read. A good horror story can gross you out, terrify you, or haunt your dreams. Horror stories depend on the reader believing in the story enough to be scared, disturbed, or disgusted. However, they can be tricky to write well. Like any fiction genre, horror can be mastered with the right planning, patience, and practice.

PART 1 OF 5: UNDERSTANDING THE HORROR GENRE

1. Be aware of the subjective nature of the horror story. Like comedy, horror can be a difficult genre to write because what makes one person freak out or scream can leave another person bored or emotionless. But like crafting a good joke, crafting a good horror story has been done many times by the masters of the genre.^[1] Though your story may not appeal to all readers, or elicit cries of terror, there will likely be at least one reader who will respond in horror to your story.

2. Read several different types of horror stories. Familiarize yourself with the genre by reading effective examples of horror, from classic ghost stories to contemporary horror writing. As famed horror writer Stephen King once said, to be a real writer, you have to "read and write a lot."^[2] Think about ghost stories or urban legends told around a campfire when you were a kid or as well as any award winning horror tales you read in school or on your own. You may want to look at specific examples like:

- "The Monkey's Paw", an 18th century tale by William Wymark Jacobs about three terrible wishes granted by a mystical monkey's paw.^[3]
- "The Tell-Tale Heart", master horror writer Edgar Allen Poe's psychologically disturbing short story of murder and haunting.^[4]
- Neil Gaiman's take on the nursery rhyme of Humpty Dumpty in "The Case of Four and Twenty Blackbirds."^[5]
- You'd be remiss not to read a horror story by arguably the master of the genre, Stephen King. He has written over 200 short stories and uses many different techniques to scare his readers. While there are many lists of his greatest horror

stories ever^[6], read “The Moving Finger”^[7] or “The Children of the Corn” to get a sense of King’s style.

- Contemporary writer Joyce Carol Oates also has a famous horror story called “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” that uses psychological terror to great effect.^[8]

3. Analyze the horror story examples. Choose one or two examples you enjoy reading or find interesting in terms of how they use a certain setting, plot, character or twist in the story to create horror or terror. For example:

- In King’s “The Moving Finger”, King takes a premise: a man who thinks he sees and hears a moving human finger scratching a wall in his bathroom and then follows the man closely over the span of a short period of time as he tries to avoid the finger, until he is forced to confront his fear of the finger. King also uses other elements like a Jeopardy game and a conversation between the main character and his wife to further create a feeling of suspense and dread.
- In Oates’ “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”, Oates establishes the main character, a young girl named Connie, by providing scenes of her daily life and then zooms in on one fateful day, when two men pull up in a car while Connie is at home all alone. Oates uses dialogue to create a sense of dread and allows the reader to experience Connie’s growing sense of fear of the threat of these men.
- In both stories, horror or terror is created through a combination of shock and dread, using elements that are possibly supernatural (a moving human finger) and elements that are psychologically disturbing (a young girl alone with two men).

PART 2 OF 5: GENERATING STORY IDEAS

1. Think about what scares you or revolts you the most. Tap into your fears of losing family members, of being alone, of violence, of clowns, of demons, or even of killer squirrels. Your fear will then come across on the page and your experience or exploration of this fear will also grip the reader.^[9]

- Make a list of your greatest fears. Then, think about how you would react if you were trapped or forced to confront these fears.
- You could also take a poll of what scares your family, friends, or partners the most. Get some subjective ideas of horror.

2. Take an ordinary situation and create something horrifying. Another approach is to look at a normal, everyday situation like taking a walk in the park, cutting up a piece of fruit, or visiting a friend and adding a terrifying or bizarre element. Such as coming across a severed ear during your walk, cutting up a piece of fruit that turns into a finger or a tentacle, or visiting an old friend who has no idea who you are or claims you are someone you are not.^[10]

- Use your imagination to create a horrifying spin on a normal, everyday activity or scene.

3. Use setting to limit or trap your characters in the story. One way to create a situation that will induce terror in a reader is to restrict your character's movements so they are forced to confront their fear and then try to find a way out.^[11]

- Think about what kind of confined spaces scare you. Where would you dread or fear being trapped in the most?
- Trap your character in a confined space like cellar, a coffin, an abandoned hospital, an island, or an abandoned town. This will create an immediate conflict or threat to the character and set your story up with immediate tension or suspense.

4. Let your characters restrict their own movements. Maybe your character is a werewolf who doesn't want to hurt anyone on the next full moon so they lock themselves in a cellar or room. Or maybe your character is so fearful of a severed finger in the bathroom, he does everything to avoid the bathroom until the finger haunts him so much he forces himself to go into the bathroom and confront it.^[12]

5. Create extreme emotions in your reader. Because horror hinges on the subjective reaction of the reader, the story should work to create several extreme feelings in the reader, including:

- Shock: the simplest way to scare the reader is to create shock with a twist ending, a sudden image of gore or a quick moment of terror. However, creating fear through shock can lead to cheap scares and if used too much, can become predictable or less likely to scare the reader.
- Paranoia: the sense that something is not quite right, which can unnerve the reader, make them doubt their own surroundings, and when used to its full effect, make the reader doubt even their own beliefs or ideas of the world. This type of fear is great for slow tension-building and psychological horror stories.
- Dread: this type of fear is the horrible sense that something bad is going to happen. Dread works well when the reader connects deeply to the story and begins to care enough about the characters to fear something bad that is going to happen to them. Inspiring dread in a reader is tricky as the story will need to do a lot of work to keep the reader engaged and involved, but it is a powerful type of fear.

6. Use horrifying details to create horror or terror in your reader. Stephen King argues there are several key ways to create a feeling of horror or terror in a story, which can then create different reactions from the reader.^[13]

- Using gross out details like a severed head tumbling down a flight of stairs, something green and slimy landing on your arm, or a character landing in a pool of blood.
- Using unnatural details (or fear of the unknown or impossible) like spiders the size of bears, an attack from the living dead, or an alien claw grabbing your feet in a dark room.

- Using terrifying psychological details like a character who comes home to another version of him or herself, or a character who experiences paralyzing nightmares which then affect their sense of reality.

7. Create a plot outline. Once you find your premise or scenario, your setting, determine which extreme emotions you are going to play on, and decide the types of horror details you are going to use in the story, create a rough outline of the story.

- You can use Freytag's pyramid^[14] to create an outline, which begins with exposition of the setting and life or day of the character(s), moves into the conflict of the character (a severed finger in the bathroom, two men in a car), shifts upward into rising action where the character tries to solve or work against the conflict but meets several complications or roadblocks, reaches the climax, and then falls downward with falling action, into the resolution where the character is changed, shifted (or in the case of some horror), meets a terrifying death.

PART 3 OF 5: DEVELOPING THE CHARACTERS

1. Make your reader care about or identify with your main character. Do this by introducing clear details and descriptions of the character's routine, relationships, and point of view.^[15]

- Determine the age and occupation of your character.
- Determine the marital status or relationship status of your character.
- Determine how they view the world (cynical, skeptical, anxious, happy-go-lucky, satisfied, settled).
- Add in specific or unique details. Make your character feel distinct with a certain character trait or tick (a hairstyle, a scar) or a mark of their appearance (an item of clothing, a piece of jewellery, a pipe or cane). A character's speech or dialect can also distinguish a character on the page, and make them stand out more to the reader.
- Once your readers identify with a character, the character becomes a bit like their child. They will empathize with the character's conflict and root for them to overcome their conflict, while also realizing that this rarely happens.
- This tension between what the reader wants for the character and what could happen or go wrong for the character will fuel the story and propel your readers through the story.

2. Be prepared for bad things to happen to your character. Most horror is about fear and tragedy and whether or not your character is capable of overcoming their fears. A story where good things happen to good people may be heartwarming but it will likely not scare or terrify your reader. In fact, the tragedy of bad things happening to good people is not only more relatable, it will also be full of tension and suspense.^[16]

- In order to create conflict in a character's life, you need to introduce a danger or threat to the character, whether it's a moving finger, two men in a car, a mystical monkey's paw or a murderous clown.
- For example, in King's "The Moving Finger", the main character, Howard, is a middle aged man who enjoys watching Jeopardy, has a comfortable relationship

with his wife, and seems to live a decent middle class life. But King does not let the reader get too comfortable in Howard's normal existence as he introduces a scratching sound in Howard's bathroom. The discovery of the finger in the bathroom, and Howard's subsequent attempts to avoid it, remove it, or destroy it, creates a story where a seemingly normal, likeable man's life is interrupted by the unknown or the unreal.

3. Allow your characters to make mistakes or bad decisions. Once you have established the threat or danger to the character, you will then need to have your character respond with the wrong move, while convincing themselves they are in fact making the right move or decision against this threat.^[17]

- Its important to create enough motivation for the character so their bad decision feels justifiable and not merely stupid or unbelievable. An attractive young babysitter who responds to a masked killer by running not to the telephone to call the police but outside into the deep, dark woods is not only a stupid character move, it also feels unbelievable to the reader or viewer.
- But if you have your character make a justifiable, though flawed, decision in response to a threat, your reader will be more willing to believe and root for that character.
- For example, in King's "The Moving Finger", Howard initially decides not to tell his wife about the finger in the bathroom because he believes he may be hallucinating or confusing the scratching noise for a mouse or animal caught in the bathroom. The story justifies Howard's decision not to tell anyone about the finger by playing off what most people who tell themselves if they witnessed a strange or bizarre event: it wasn't real, or I'm just seeing things.
- The story then justifies Howard's reaction by allowing his wife to go into the bathroom and not comment about seeing a moving finger by the toilet. So, the story plays with Howard's perception of reality and indicates that maybe he did hallucinate the finger.

4. Make the stakes for the character clear and extreme. The "stakes" of a character in a story is what your character has to lose if they make a certain decision or choice in the story. If your reader doesn't know what is at stake for the character in the conflict, they cannot fear loss. And a good horror story is all about creating extreme emotions like fear or anxiety in the reader through creating extreme emotions in the characters.

- Fear is built off of understanding the consequences of an action for a character or the risk of their actions. So if your character decides to confront a clown in the attic or two men in a car, the reader will need to be aware of what the character could lose as a result of this decision. Preferably, your character's stakes should be extreme or major, such as loss of sanity, loss of innocence, loss of life, or loss of the life of someone they care about.
- In the case of King's story, the main character is afraid that if he confronts the finger, he may risk losing his sanity. The stakes of the character in the story are very high and very clear to the reader. So, when Howard does finally confront the moving finger, the reader is terrified of how the outcome is going to create a loss for Howard.

PART 4 OF 5: CREATING A HORRIFIC CLIMAX AND A TWIST ENDING

1. Manipulate the reader but do not confuse them. Readers can either be confused or scared, but not both. Deceiving or manipulating your readers through foreshadowing, shifting character traits, or a revelation of a plot point can all work to build suspense and create anxiety or fear in the reader.^{[18][19]}

- Hint at the horrific climax of the story by providing small clues or details, such as the label on a bottle that will later come in handy for the main character, a sound or voice in a room that will later become an indication of an unnatural presence, or even a loaded gun in a pillow that may later go off or be used by the main character.
- Build tension by alternating from tense or bizarre moments to quiet moments where your character can take a breath in a scene, calm down, and feel safe again. Then, amp up the tension by re engaging the character in the conflict and then making the conflict feel even more serious or threatening.
- In “The Moving Finger”, King does this by having Howard freak out about the finger, then have a relatively normal conversation with his wife while listening to Jeopardy and thinking about the finger, and then attempt to avoid the finger by going for a walk. Howard begins to feel safe or assured that the finger is not real, but of course, once he opens the bathroom door, the finger seems to have grown longer and is moving much faster than it was before.
- King slowly builds tension for both the character and the reader by introducing the threat and then having it overshadow the rest of the story. As readers, we know the finger is a sign of something bad or possibly evil, and are now in a position to watch Howard try to avoid, and then eventually confront this evil.

2. Add a twist ending. A good twist in a horror story can make or break the story, so it's important to create a twist ending that ties up many of the loose ends in the character's conflict but still leaves one major question up in the air to tease the reader's imagination.^[20]

- While you want to create a satisfying ending for the reader, you also do not want to make it so closed and settled that the reader walks away without a lingering feeling of uncertainty.
- You could have the character experience a moment of realization about the conflict or about how to solve the conflict. The revelation should be the result of a build up of details in the scene or story and should not be jarring or feel random to the reader.^[21]
- In “The Moving Finger”, Howard's moment of realization occurs when he figures out that the finger may be a signifier of an evil or wrong in the world. He asks the police officer, who is there to arrest him after noise complaints from the neighbors, a final Jeopardy question, in the category of the “inexplicable”. “Why do terrible things sometimes happen to the nicest people?” Howard asks. The police officer then turns to open the toilet, where Howard stored the slaughtered finger, and “wagers it all” before opening the toilet seat to look at the inexplicable or unknown.

- This ending leaves the reader wondering what the officer sees in the toilet, and if the finger was real or a figment of Howard's imagination. In this way, it is open ended without being too surprising or confusing for the reader.

3. Avoid cliches. Like any genre, horror has its own set of tropes and cliches that writers should avoid if they want to create a unique, engaging horror story. From familiar images like a deranged clown in the attic to a babysitter alone in a house at night, to familiar phrases like "Run!" or "Don't look behind you!", cliches are tricky to avoid in this genre.^[22]

- Focus on creating a story that feels personally terrifying to you. Or, add a twist to a familiar horror trope, like a vampire who enjoys cake instead of blood, or a man trapped in a dumpster rather than a coffin.
- Remember that too much gore or violence can actually have a desensitizing effect on the reader, especially if the same pools of blood keep happening over and over again in the story. Of course, some gore is good and likely necessary in a horror story. But make sure you use gore in a spot in the story that is impactful or meaningful, so it can punch your reader in the gut, rather than numb them or bore them.^[23]
- Another way you can avoid cliches is to focus more on creating a disturbed or unsettled state of mind for your character, rather than images of gore or pools of blood. Pictorial memories often don't stick in a reader's mind, but the effect of these images on a character will likely create a lingering creepiness for the reader. So aim not for your reader's imagination but for a disturbance in your reader's state of mind.^[24]

PART 5 OF 5: REVISING THE STORY

1. Analyze your use of language. Go through the first draft of your story and look at sentences where you have duplicated adjectives, nouns or verbs. Maybe you have a preference for the adjective "red" to describe a dress or a pool of blood. But adjectives like "ruby, russet, crimson" can add texture to the language and turn a conventional phrase like "a red pool of blood" into a more interesting phrase, like "a crimson pool of blood."

- Get out your thesaurus and replace any redundant word use with synonyms to avoid using the same words or phrases over and over again in the story.
- Be sure to make your language use and word choice fit the voice of your character. A teenage girl will likely use different words or phrases than a middle aged man. Creating a vocabulary for your character that fits their personality and perspective will only add to their believability as character.

2. Read your story out loud. You can do this to a mirror or to a group of people you trust. Horror stories began as an oral tradition of spooking someone around a campfire, so reading your story out loud will help you determine if the pace of the story is building steadily and gradually, if there is enough shock, paranoia, or dread, and if your characters make all the wrong decisions until they are forced to confront the source of their conflict.

- If your story is dialogue heavy, reading it out loud will also help you determine if the dialogue sounds believable and natural.
- If your story contains a twist ending, gauging your reader's reaction by watching your audience's faces will help you determine if the ending is effective or needs more work.

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