Story-writing Scaffolds

Scaffolding for a range of fiction genres!

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Horror stories

In a horror story, the author aims to build up fear and suspense in the reader’s mind. They should be scared to read on and yet unable to stop themselves!

The development of the plot and the characters is the cornerstone of a horror story. It is not necessary to produce endless pages of fear and carnage, the power of suggestion is a far more powerful tool that is only limited by the reader’s own imagination.

Detailed descriptions of the setting, both place and time, draw the reader into the story. Anxiety can be heightened by hostile and isolated locations, whereas strange events can often be more worrying in seemingly familiar surroundings.

While some horror stories are an exhausting chain of scary events, others create disquiet in more subtle ways. The use of figurative language such as similes and metaphors can add an extra dimension to a character’s personality or increase the impact of the unusual.

The evil characters in horror tales often have supernatural powers. It can often be the ordinary or unremarkable individual who is revealed as a menacing force. The author may create uncertainty about the motives, identity or actions of a particular character: dropping hints and then revealing all in a surprising twist at the end.

Common horror themes include the fear of separation, being trapped and being lost. People’s phobias provide a wealth of extra material; spiders, bats, insects and vicious wildlife can add another element of unease to the plot.

The author is able to direct the reader’s thinking by raising questions to confuse, intrigue or suggest possible outcomes. Even the way that the text is written can add to the building of tension and fear. Several short consecutive sentences convey a sense of urgency or panic, whereas lengthy complex sentences string out the sense of expectation.

The resolution of a horror story often involves the triumph of good over evil, leaving the reader with a welcome sense of relief. In contrast, cliffhanger endings, where the reader is left with an acute sense of impending doom or the realisation of an evil truth, allow the story to linger worryingly in the mind.

It is important to remember that not all children are comfortable with either reading or writing horror stories. Parents will appreciate being told that their children are exploring this genre of writing so that they can provide additional support if required. Of course, other children will relish the opportunity to describe gruesome details and terrifying events!

Examples of horror stories

Scary Stories for Nine Year Olds edited by Helen Pialba (Macmillan, 1999)
Invasion of the Vampire Spiders by Susan Gates (Puffin Books, 2001)
A Dungeon Full of Monster Stories edited by Pat Thomson (Corgi Children’s, 2001)
Clockwork or All Wound Up by Phillip Pullman (Corgi Yearling, 1997)
The Young Oxford Book of Nightmares edited by Dennis Pepper (Oxford University Press, 2002)
Totally Wicked! By Paul Jennings and Morris Gleitzman (Puffin Books, 2000)
Short and Scary! (Short!) by Louise Cooper (Oxford University Press, 2002)
The night was dark. The candles flickered. The house was old ... and it was listening.

"I just happen to find electricity quite useful, that's all! It doesn't mean that I don't like it here!"

"The house is decrepit, the wiring is faulty and the electrician seems to have gone missing." His mother rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Just what am I supposed to do about it?"

"I don't think that the house wants us here. It doesn't want to be changed."

"Nonsense, this place will be fantastic once we have renovated it!" With that happy thought, she trod a careful path through the rotten timbers of the hall floor and was swallowed up by the gloom of the kitchen.

Tom sighed. Oh yeah. This house was a real bargain! Only his parents would buy a property where the previous owner had disappeared under mysterious circumstances and every room was in a dilapidated state — except for the library. The library was weird. He always felt as if it was the heart of the house: the chamber that pumped life into the rickety walls and kept the whole place standing. Groaning shelves lined it from floor to ceiling, looking as if they were about to buckle under the weight of the leather-bound books. Wooden shutters over the windows prevented the sunlight from getting in and heavy dust aged in the air. The books themselves seemed to beg to be released from the shelves. There were some very unusual titles with bizarre illustrations and Tom could lose himself for hours in their pages.

There was one book in particular that had come to his attention. It had a blood-red cover and the pattern up the spine looked like grasping fingers. The book was entitled, 'My Life' but there was no mention of an author and the pages were blank. Tom decided to use it as a scrapbook and immediately scrawled his name on the front page.

In the days that followed, Tom added photographs and mementos of his life to the book. Pictures of him and his school friends at his last party, the newspaper clipping of when he won a skateboarding competition and the ticket from his trip on the Zig Zag Railway. He even managed to get a paw print from his dog, Scruffy, by leaving the book open on the floor just inside the front door. The pages were filling up.

Things were not going well with the house. Every time an area was worked on, it revealed more that needed fixing. It was as if the house were rotten on the inside. The peeling plaster and rotten boards were merely the oozing scabs on a far deeper wound. Workmen arrived and then left with excuses and tasks unfinished. Money was tight. Tempers were frayed.

The school holidays came round and Tom tried hard to ease the burden on his parents. He wrestled up loose timbers and scraped at the grungy old paper that clung to the resistant walls. Blisters grew and burst on his fingers as he wrestled with piles of rubble, his torn and jagged fingernails a sign of his struggles. He began to view the house as a giant onion with layer upon layer of putrid skin that needed to be peeled away.

The scrapbook

The reader enters the story in the middle of a conversation. It is not clear who the characters are.

A hint that even the adult has no power in this situation.

The house is personified.

A compound sentence.

Only now is the scene set for the reader.

This simile of the library as the heart highlights the importance of the library within the house.

A hint that even the books want to escape from the house.

A compound sentence joined by ‘and’.

The strangeness of the book is highlighted.

Adverb clause marks the passing of time.

Use of the word ‘mementos’ instead of ‘souvenirs’ suggests that his life is almost over.

A gory metaphor.

A simple sentence.

Use of powerful verbs to show the effort involved.

The image is that he has caught an infection from the house.

A ‘rotten’ simile.
In the midst of all this work, Tom was secreting parts of his life in the welcoming pages of the book. Every item seemed to fit into its own place on the page, like a piece in a favourite jigsaw. When he came to the double spread at the heart of the book he began to map out his family tree. In no time at all, the images of his parents smiled out from the paper. His little sister, who had died when only a few days old, was there in the single picture of her that he owned. The grandparents he had never met watched him gravely and even Scruffy had been immortalised in a print; He was now more than half way through the book — his life.

The house was putting up a fight. It was as if it did not want to be altered. Tom’s father was injured when a ceiling collapsed and his mother had to give up work to look after him. Time passed. Costs rose. Anxiety spread. Money was tight. Tempers were short.

The family spent more and more of their time in the house. Tom spent most of his time in the library. It was the only room in the house that had not been touched; the shelves continued to battle against the downward force of the books, the light was still barred from entering. However, Tom’s interest in other books had faded. He felt that he had to fill up the remaining few empty leaves in his own book; that this was all that mattered. He began to include drawings of his own, drawings of the house. They were all in charcoal: black shadows with smudged lines. That was how he was beginning to feel, as if he were smudged around the edges. The house was beating him: it was beating them all.

There came the day that Tom turned to the last page. He could hear his parents arguing in the kitchen. Scruffy was nowhere to be found but there was a lot of his fur on the library floor. The book felt heavy in his hands: it bulged with the details of his life and there was only one page left. He wondered how to fill that final space. He had no more photographs to stick in. Everyone he knew and cared about was already between the pages.

He decided to sketch a picture of himself, a self-portrait. As his hand moved across the paper, the charcoal lines began to take shape. His head, his features looked back at him as he filled in his own details ... his reflection stared out at him. No longer was he able to hear his parents’ voices, the house was silent. It was strange, he thought, all that work and the house appeared exactly the same — still rotten. Now he had drawn his hands, his legs, his feet. Why were his parents so quiet? His picture was finished. There he was on the page. In the bottom corner he wrote, ‘This is Me. This is my life.’ And then as an afterthought, ‘The End!’

A few days later the police arrived. None of the family had been seen for a while and a neighbour had reported that the windows and doors were all wide open. The house was deserted. All traces of Tom and his parents were gone. The police searched the house from top to bottom but there was no sign of life. An official investigation was set up but it provided no answers.

Months passed and a ‘For Sale’ sign was erected in the house’s overgrown garden. A family with two children came to look around the property and decided that it was just what they were looking for. They would fix it up in no time. Plus, it had an amazing library that was already filled with books! The sign came down and the family moved in.

The building work began. Walls were pulled down and floors were pulled up. It was as if the house groaned. It was not long before one of the children had found an unusual book; it had a blood-red cover and its pages were completely empty — except for a charcoal smudge and a few strands of what looked like human hair. On the very first page the child wrote, ‘My Stuff!’ and drew a picture of herself.
The Scrapbook

The night was dark. The candles flickered. The house was old … and it was listening.

“I just happen to find electricity quite useful, that’s all! It doesn’t mean that I don’t like it here!”

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Understanding the grammar and punctuation

Simple sentences
A simple sentence is made up of one main clause and a single verb.

*The house was dark.*

Compound sentences
A compound sentence contains two or more clauses joined by a conjunction, such as ‘or’, ‘and’, ‘but’ or ‘so’.

*The police searched the house from top to bottom but there was no sign of life.*

Complex sentences
A complex sentence is made up of one main clause and one or more subordinate clauses. A subordinate clause generally starts with a subordinating conjunction (as, while, although etc.) or a relative pronoun (who, which etc.). The subordinate clause provides more information about the main clause. It usually does not make sense on its own.

*The house was dark and, although he was afraid of being discovered, the frightened boy lit a candle.*

Commas
Commas can be used to identify the different clauses in a sentence. They make the reader pause and increase the emphasis on the main clause.

*He felt that he had to fill up the remaining few empty leaves in his own book, that this was all that mattered.*

Brackets and dashes
Brackets and dashes can also be used to separate an extra piece of information from the main part of the sentence.

*It was strange, he thought, all that work and the house appeared exactly the same – still rotten.*
Simple, compound and complex sentences

Circle the verb in each of these simple sentences.

1. I could hear footsteps right behind me.
2. The torch fell from my clammy hand.
3. It bounced noisily down the steep steps.
4. I was left in total darkness!
5. The footsteps faded away.
6. I breathed a huge sigh of relief.

Read this passage and underline the simple sentences.

The shadowy figure crawled out of the shallow pit and lumbered away. The children decided to follow it. An overhanging branch scratched its scarred face but it took no notice. It smelled disgusting! Suddenly, sensing they were there, it turned and screamed at them. It was time to make a quick exit. The children fled.

Form compound sentences by joining two clauses together using one of these connectives: or, and, but or so.

1. The eerie silence made the boy nervous ________ he started to hum a cheerful tune.
2. A scaly hand grabbed him from behind ________ he screamed at the top of his voice.
3. Blocking the door was a huge snarling dog ________ the boy had no other escape route.
4. A pale figure walked towards him ________ rather it floated in his direction!
5. The slithering noise was a venomous snake ________ I decided to leave it well alone.
Commas

Using two different coloured pens, circle each of the two clauses that make up these sentences. The position of the commas will give you a clue!

1. As I walked towards the old mansion, I saw a light at the window.

2. There was no question about it, the eyes in the picture were moving!

3. The last person in the line suddenly disappeared, snatched by a hungry beast.

4. Every muscle in his body ached, it was an effort to move.

5. Something was moving inside the box, so I carefully removed the lid.

Here are some complex sentences that have commas missing. Put commas around the extra information in the sentence. Read the sentences aloud to check that they make sense.

1. The girl who was terrified of ghosts decided not to go into the haunted house.

2. On the top of the hill howling at the moon was a large grey werewolf.

3. Looking as if he had seen a ghost the old man who lived alone quickly pulled the curtains closed.

4. Realising that it was her last chance to escape the girl made another grab at the rope hoping that it would hold her weight.

5. The castle so I have been told was once the home of an evil king who in turn was poisoned by his servant.
How to build suspense and create fear

Explain to the students that they can make their stories scarier by using different writing techniques:

- Dropping hints to the reader that something strange or disturbing is going to happen in the story. For example:

  The night was dark. The candles flickered. The house was old … and it was listening.

- Locating the story in a strange and hostile environment immediately creates anxiety. However, an everyday setting can make unusual happenings seem more threatening. For example:

  Only his parents would buy a property where the previous owner had disappeared under mysterious circumstances and every room was in a dilapidated state – except for the library.

- Using figurative language such as similes and metaphors. For example:

  The peeling plaster and rotten boards were merely the oozing scabs on a far deeper wound.

- Raising questions to confuse, intrigue or suggest possibilities to the reader. For example:

  Why were his parents so quiet?

- Placing several short sentences consecutively to convey a sense of urgency or panic. These can include a one- or two-word sentence. For example:

  Time passed. Costs rose. Anxiety spread. Money was tight. Tempers were short.

- Bringing settings and characters to life with vivid descriptions of their appearances and personality. Of course the story needs to have an interesting plot, as well lots of terrifying and gruesome descriptions!

  Wooden shutters over the windows prevented the sunlight from getting in and heavy dust aged in the air.

  Blisters grew and burst on his fingers as he wrestled with piles of rubble, his torn and jagged fingernails a sign of his struggles.

- Using creepy and menacing words in the story. For example:

  putrid, oozing, dilapidated, rotten, mysterious, groaning

- Building up suspense by causing characters to disappear, become trapped or injured. For example:

  Scruffy was nowhere to be found but there was a lot of his fur on the library floor.

- When writing dialogue, an element of uncertainty can be created if it is not stated who is speaking. This should become apparent from the nature of the conversation. For example:

  “I just happen to find electricity quite useful, that’s all! It doesn’t mean that I don’t like it here!”

  “The house is decrepit, the wiring is faulty and the electrician seems to have gone missing.” His mother rolled her eyes in exasperation. “Just what am I supposed to do about it?”

  “I don’t think that the house wants us here. It doesn’t want to be changed.”

- The right ending should be chosen for the story. Will the climax of the tale result in good overcoming evil? Or perhaps a nail-biting cliffhanger ending is more your style?
Helpful hints for writing a horror story

The best horror stories are not the most gruesome tales but the ones that create suspense and fear in the mind of the reader. Here are some tips for scary writing!

♦ Bring your characters to life with vivid descriptions of their appearance and personality. Evil characters and supernatural beings often play a main role in horror stories.

♦ Horror stories are usually written in the past tense.

♦ Use dark and moody describing words to set the scene for your story. Remember to include the time and the place in which the story is set.

♦ Write your story in the third person (he, she or it).

♦ Drop hints to the reader that something strange or weird is going to happen in the story.

♦ Use pronouns to refer to any mysterious characters before telling the reader their names.

♦ Build up the tension in your story by causing characters to disappear or become trapped.

♦ Raise questions to confuse the reader. Allow them to see dangers that the characters are unaware of.

♦ Use short sentences to build up a sense of panic. Several short sentences (they may just be one or two words in length) will make the reader feel that the story is moving out of control.

♦ Include surprising events and twists in your plot. Aim to make your reader feel anxious as they meet unexpected problems.

♦ Make sure that your story includes some creepy and menacing words.

♦ Use dialogue to show what is going on in the story. You can build suspense by not saying who is speaking but rather by showing it through what is said.

♦ Most horror stories end with good overcoming evil. However, cliffhanger endings, where the reader is left to imagine the outcome, can be very effective. Decide which is best for your story.
Horror story
Scaffold 1

You are going to write a horror story.
To help plan your story, use the framework below.
Choose one option from each stage.

**Stage One**

Choose the characters for the story.

a) Two school friends who wanted to become famous film makers.

b) Two siblings who belonged to a nature watch group.

**Stage Two**

Set the scene for the story.

The children were set a project to find out about nocturnal creatures. They decided to search for them in:

a) a crumbling, disused churchyard/cemetery;

b) a derelict old mansion.

They found some tracks and decided to follow them.

**Stage Three**

Start your story with a good beginning.

a) The darkness seemed to suck the light out of the torch.
   There was just enough of a glow to see each other’s terrified face and read the stark message in their eyes. ‘We should go back!’

b) Hostile eyes watched the children from the shadows. This was not their place; they were intruding. They would have to pay the price.
Stage Four

Give the characters a problem.

A mysterious fog had formed and the children got lost.

a) They stumbled across a roost of giant vampire bats. In trying to escape the children became separated.

b) They realised that they were being followed by something large and angry. They started to run. One of them fell and was injured.

Stage Five

Say what happens next.

a) A ghostly figure appeared and led them out of the fog to safety.

b) One child was found wandering the streets. The other had disappeared without trace.

Stage Six

Say how the story ends.

a) A story was written about their adventure and it was made into a movie — a box office smash.

b) No one was ever told what had happened that night. The survivor never explained why his/her hair had turned white with fear.
Horror story
Vocabulary bank 1

anticipation
dark
darkness
dashed
disappear
disbelief
disused, deserted
dread
explore
fear
figure
fog, mist
footsteps
fright
frightening
ghastly, gruesome
grave
groan
horrible
horror
moan, sigh
murky
nervous
panic
pursue
released
scary
scream
secret, secretive
shadow
shout
surprised
terror, terrifying
tombstone
trapped
tremble
vanish
vicious
wail
warning
weird, strange

My own words
Writing features

Story themes

Story characters
Many traditional stories, such as myths, legends and fairytales, have common themes. They usually have a hero or heroine who represents ‘good’ and a villain who represents ‘evil’. The villain acts as an antagonist to the hero or heroine and usually comes to a ‘sticky’ or unpleasant end.

It is useful for students to know that these are stereotypical characters and that in many less traditional stories the hero/heroine and the villain are more rounded, complex characters. In these stories, characters will not be completely good or evil, although most stories will still create the triumph of good over evil through the development of the story. Sometimes the main character is an ‘anti-hero’, someone fairly ordinary and inadequate in certain ways.

The heroes/heroines and villains that appear in traditional stories, however, are ‘stock characters’, so called because they are easily recognised from recurrent appearances: the heroines are beautiful, good and noble; the villains are ugly, wicked and want some form of power or control, as in the story of Cinderella and her ugly step-sisters.

Story content
Another familiar theme in these stories is the use of trials and forfeits, as in the story The Twelve Labours of Heracles. The hero/heroine often has to endure several unpleasant or arduous tasks before being able to win out in the end. Such events make the story more interesting for the reader and help to add pace and excitement to the story. We are never quite sure whether the hero/heroine will survive each trial or whether each forfeit will finally overcome the strength and determination of the character — and this is what makes the reader want to read on.

This strength of character is another familiar theme. The hero/heroine is portrayed as being very strong — either physically or mentally or both. The villain, however, always has some weak spot that the hero/heroine manages, through determination and strength, to identify and then overcome, as in The Children of Nut.

These stories often portray the hero/heroine as being very wise in his/her exploits and decisions, whereas the villain is usually characterised as being extremely foolish, as in the story The Tortoise and the Hare. This can add some humour to the story as well as providing the reader with a satisfying conclusion — the reader can triumphantly decide “I knew that wouldn’t work” or “I certainly wouldn’t have done it that way!”

Students need to be made aware that traditional stories — myths, legends, fairytales and fables — were originally told to entertain and inform the listeners and usually impart some kind of moral message. The familiar story themes encourage the reader to be good, strong and wise like the hero/heroine in order to lead a happy, successful life. And because something awful always happens to the villain, the reader is discouraged from displaying traits that are weak, foolish or evil.
Helpful hints for writing an Egyptian myth

Begin your story to make it sound a long time ago. Use beginnings such as:

Long, long ago...
Once, long ago in the land of Egypt...
Back when the earth was new...

Set your story in ancient Egypt, not modern day Egypt. Use books to help you find suitable names of places, such as: Edfu and Kahun.

Most Egyptian myths are stories about the gods and their powers. Use books to help you find out about some of these gods. Remember, most gods have several different names. Here are some of their names:

- Amon
- Horus
- Mut
- Osiris
- Seth
- Hathor
- Isis
- Nut
- Ra
- Thoth

Make one of your characters ‘good’ and the other one ‘bad’ with the good one winning in the end. Or

Make sure your story has a moral in it so the readers can learn a lesson about how they should behave in life.

Include magic in your story. The gods always used magic to help them.

Egyptian myths often have terrible things happen to one of the characters such as being cut up into pieces or eaten by an animal!

In many Egyptian myths the gods come alive again later after they have been killed (usually by magic from another god).

Some Egyptian myths end telling us the reason for the story. It is often to do with nature, such as why the moon is brighter on some evenings than others or why the Nile river floods.

And this is why...

So from that day forward the Moon was only able to shine brightly on a few days of the month and had to spend the rest of the time gathering its strength together.
Egyptian myth
Scaffold 1

You are going to write an Egyptian myth.
To help plan your story, use the framework below.
Choose one option from each stage.

Stage One
Choose the characters for your story.

a) The goddess Isis and her seven scorpions.
b) Ra and the goddess Sekhmet.

Stage Two
Start your story with a good beginning.

a) Long, long ago in the Egypt of our past, there lived a beautiful goddess called Isis.
b) Long ago when the world was new, there lived a powerful god called Ra. Ra created all the things on earth, including the people of Egypt.

Stage Three
Set the scene for the story.

a) Isis spent many years travelling Egypt in search of her husband, Osiris. Whenever she travelled into a town for supplies, she always took seven scorpions with her. Three of the scorpions called Petet, Tjetet and Matet, walked in front of her. Mesejet and Mesejetef walked on each side of her and Tefen and Befen walked behind her.

b) After Ra finished making the world, he took on the shape of a man and became a mighty Pharaoh. He ruled over Egypt for thousands of years.
Give the characters a problem.

a) One day when Isis reached a town a noblewoman saw her coming down the street with all the scorpions and quickly shut the door to her house. The scorpions were very angry that the woman had been so rude. They decided to teach the woman a lesson.

b) One day, the people began to realise that Ra was very old so they made fun of him. This made Ra very angry and he called all the other gods to a meeting.

Say how the problem is solved.

a) Six of the scorpions gave their poison to Tefen. He put all the poison into his stinger. He crawled under the door of the noblewoman’s house and stung her son. The woman was very upset and ran into the street for help.

b) The gods told Ra how very powerful he was. They said that if he turned his eye on the people he could kill them. So Ra changed his eye into the goddess Sekhmet who went to the earth and started killing people.

Say how the story ends.

a) Isis was upset to see the boy dying so she used her magic to save him. The noblewoman was so pleased that she gave all her wealth to Isis.

b) Ra was upset by what Sekhmet was doing — he didn’t really want to kill his people. So Ra ordered that 7 000 jars of beer be coloured red and poured into a field. When Sekhmet saw it she thought the beer was blood so she drank it. She became so drunk that she had to give up killing the people.
Egyptian myth
Vocabulary bank 1

angry
beer
blood
created
crawled
Egypt
god
goddess
house
Isis
lesson
noblewoman
Pharaoh
poison
powerful
Ra
scorpion
search
Sekhmet
seven
stinger
upset
wealth
years
stung

My own words
An essential resource for every teacher who wants to improve their students’ story-writing skills

The Story-writing Scaffolds series teaches students how to plan and write stories in a variety of different genres as well as incorporating specific grammar, vocabulary and writing features. The books in the series include:

- Teacher’s notes on the genres and text formats
- Illustrated photocopiable exemplar stories together with an annotated teacher’s version that highlights the grammar, punctuation and writing techniques used in the story
- Guidance on how to develop specific grammar skills in student’s writing
- Photocopiable activity sheets to reinforce the grammar
- Guidance on how to assist students to write a particular genre
- Notes and tips for students on writing stories
- Story scaffolds for each genre that enable students to choose the course of the story they are writing
- Vocabulary banks for each genre, to use and add to

This versatile resource is ideal for shared, guided and individual writing. It provides a structured, but flexible system for planning stories, which can be applied to any writing lesson.

The eight units in this book cover the story types below:

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