

HOW TO WRITE YOUR OWN GHOST STORY

Do you love ghost stories and want to try writing one yourself? Or did you see HighTide's production of *More...Ghost Stories By Candlelight* and now feel inspired? Come and have a go...if you think you're scary enough. Send it to us for a chance to have it performed by professional actors.

The writers of *More...Ghost Stories By Candlelight* were all inspired by the famous short story writer, M.R. James. He set many of his most well-known ghost stories in East Anglia. In this guide we've included his 'top tips' for writing scary tales and we've added in some of our own modern tips too.

TOP TIPS FOR SPOOKY TALES

1. Main Character

It's much scarier if spooky things happen to normal people. So when considering who your main character is, M.R. James said they should be "of the writer's own day. The seer of ghosts must talk something like me [or you], and be dressed in my [or your] fashion...if he is to enlist my sympathy."

2. Your Ghost

M.R. James thought that all ghosts should be evil, "malevolent or odious". But our playwrights thought there was more variety to choose from. They found [this short video](#) really helpful. It describes 3 different types of ghosts:

- The 'Furious Returned' ghost: one who has met a terrible end and who wants the living to remember it. They are often victims of a great injustice.
- The 'Leave Me Alone' ghost: one who is stuck in a place and who simply wants us, the living, to get out.
- The 'Still With Us' ghost: one who we know from our past, or one who is a stranger to us, but either way a ghost who continues to interact with the living for some reason.

Pick a type of ghost who is right for your story and enjoy deciding **why** they choose to appear to your main character.

3. Time period

We think that ghost stories are scarier if they are set today and not in the distant past. It means that the audience can imagine it might happen to them too. On time period, M.R. James said "I think that a setting so modern that the ordinary reader can judge of its naturalness for himself is preferable to anything antique..."

4. Place

A strong sense of place is really important in a ghost story. Sometimes the landscapes or buildings that ghost stories are set in feel like main characters themselves. M.R. James set many of his famous ghost stories in East Anglia, a part of the UK he was very familiar with and where he grew up. Our playwrights set their short plays in places they know and love. Consider setting your story in a

place you know really well so that you can confidently describe it in detail.

5. The Five Senses

Our playwrights noticed that the best ghost stories paint a picture using the five senses of sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. This means your audience can really imagine being there too. Once you've decided on your setting, enjoy describing it in full, sensory detail. Focus on colour, texture, light, shadow, silence, loud noises, the weather, the time of day, the natural world around your character...

6. Building Tension

All good ghost stories start slow, on a normal day. Then, as your story continues, you can begin to drop in unexpected events and creeping sensations. Wait until the right moment – often only at the very end – to reveal your ghost. M.R. James said: "Let us be introduced to the actors [your main character] in a placid way; let us see them going about their ordinary business, undisturbed...and into this calm environment let the ominous thing put out its head, unobtrusively at first, and then more insistently, until it holds the stage."

7. Less is More

Sometimes suggestion is the most powerful ghost storytelling tool, and M.R. James agreed. Let the audience's imagination do some of the work for you, especially at the scariest moments.

GETTING STARTED

Sometimes staring at a blank piece of paper is scarier than the story you're trying to write! So here are some **ideas to help you get started**:

- Try some of these prompts to get writing: "It was a perfectly normal day, just like any other..." "If I had known then what I know now, I might never have..." "I was almost at home when..."
- Making lists is a great way to collect material which you could use in your story. Try these to get you started: Your 10 biggest fears; 10 smells that evoke a memory (good or bad); 5 places that you have a strong connection to; 5 things you wouldn't (normally) do after dark.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

We would love to read your short ghost stories! You can write a ghost story intended to be read on the page. Or you can write a ghost story intended to be performed on stage. It's up to you. Your submission should be between 700 and 1000 words long and written as a monologue or a first person narrative. Whether you're an experienced writer or a first-timer, anyone can have a go.

If you want to share them with us, please send them to george@hightide.org.uk by 18th December 2024. We will then select the spookiest to be featured in an e-zine on the HighTide website.