



Spine-tingling short stories from the theatre

KS2 Local History

KS2 Building tension and suspense

KS3 History: Local Study

- Creative writing projects, with photocopiable examples of great suspense and mystery writing
- KS2 suspense writing discussion notes and comprehension
- Creative writing activity
- KS2 and KS3 Local History Topic
- School author visit details



Stage Fright is a collection of three spooky short stories set in the same south London theatre at three different points in the building's history: the 1870s, the 1940s and the 1970s.

“This exciting collection of short stories is brimming with suspense, twists and chills and is sure to delight both avid and more reluctant readers of 9+”

Mary Rees, the Book Craic children's books reviews

Inspiring mystery and suspense writing

Suitable for ages 9 – 14, these suspenseful, spooky stories will inspire UKS2 and LKS3 pupils to create their own stories that incorporate suspense, a mysterious atmosphere and the build up of tension. In *Stage Fright*, young readers will see how the techniques that are required for successful suspense writing are employed to great effect by the author – and as they enjoy the stories they will see how they add up to immensely exciting tales.

Each story can be completed in one or two readings making them perfect for use as class readers and an introduction to mystery and suspense writing at UKS2 or LKS3.

Photocopiable extracts of great mystery and suspense writing

The extracts in this resource pack can be used with the included comprehension exercises and also photocopied for further use.

Local History

The three stories are set in a local theatre and reflect the building's change use over time – from Victorian music hall, to cinema and finally a budget clothing store.

Using a variety of local archives, the author, Rosie Radford, has meticulously researched the change in use of the building and the characters who would have passed through its doors.

Rosie is available for KS2 and Lower KS3 school author visits to tie in with literacy and local history topics.

Rosie Radford author visits

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Stage Fright is available from specialist school suppliers in addition to online booksellers such as [Wordery](#), [Bookshop.org.uk](#) and [Amazon UK](#).

Activities linked to the text

- **Read for Pleasure.** Share *Stage Fright* story one, *A Perilous Act*, as a class reader or as independent reading. The stories are suitable for ages 9+ and are short, sharp and full of suspense, so they make a great introduction to or enrichment of the mystery and suspense UKS2 topic or LKS3 creative writing.
- **Activity One: analyse mystery and suspense techniques used by the author, by looking at extracts from the stories.** Pupils can analyse how the author uses the techniques of mystery and suspense writing. The Discussion Notes pick out examples of the mystery and suspense writing techniques used by the author and can be discussed with the class. The Comprehension Exercise is based on the notes.
- **Activity Two: comprehension.** From a list provided, pupils are asked to pick out the suspense and mystery writing techniques, from two extracts, one from the first story, *A Perilous Act* and the other from *The Ghost Light*.
- **Activity Three: Creative Writing.** Pupils can choose from one of three pictures from the book, as a prompt to complete their own mystery and suspense descriptions.
- **Additional Follow Up.** Pupils can read the second and third *Stage Fright* stories and see how their own creative writing compares with that of the author.

The key ingredients of mystery and suspense writing with examples from *Stage Fright*, by Rosie Radford.

Discussion/Teacher Notes

What is suspense?

Suspense is used by authors to keep readers interested in the story. Authors build suspense by creating a situation or a sequence of events that keeps the reader guessing about what will happen next – and when a reader wants to know what will happen next they are very likely to keep reading, which is just what the author wants.

What is a mystery story?

A **mystery story** uses suspense as part of the entire plot of the story: the mystery, or puzzle, is set out by the author at the start of the story and the reader is kept guessing throughout. At the end, near the end of the story, the author reveals the answer to the puzzle.

Suspense can also be used within an individual scene, chapter or description of a story.

What are the key ingredients in mystery and suspense writing?

Tension

Tension is a great way to build up suspense. Tension is a feeling of worry that something scary or unpleasant is going to happen. In stories, authors build up tension in the story by making their characters and their readers tense and nervous about what will happen next.

As tension is about what is going to happen (in the future), using a **deadline or countdown** is a very effective way for authors to create tension – it creates urgency.

For example, In chapter six of the first *Stage Fright* story (*A Perilous Act*) the author tells us that the main character, an escapologist, has just three minutes to escape from a wooden tank that has been immersed in water, before he will run out of air. There is then a countdown that runs throughout the chapter to remind the reader of how many seconds the escapologist has left to escape from the tank:

"Countdown – 90 seconds. *All the chains were off. Time now for the cuffs on his hands and feet. James began to hear blood ring in his ears. But he stayed steady. He bent his head to his hands and opened his mouth.*

James had lost his teeth as a lad, when he was lifting himself in the air by holding a rope in his mouth – his strong jaw gripped, but his teeth gave out.

But he called this his 'silver lining' – because now his tongue tilted the plate of the false teeth in his mouth and his searching fingers found the hidden lock-pick – not much bigger than a matchstick – he pulled it out. His movements were becoming more sluggish, but he was still in control. He reached down to the cuffs which encircled each ankle. Fumbling at the lock he manipulated his pick, wriggling it in the small hole of the cuff's lock. It was the most intricate part of the escape. Holding the small tool steady with his toes, he turned it delicately. And then, his legs were freed.

Countdown – 60 seconds. *Next, the handcuffs on his wrists. He unlocked the first set of cuffs.*

Then the second.

The third set, because they were placed high up his flexed forearms, slid easily off his now slackened arms.

He moved painstakingly now – each movement carefully orchestrated to preserve his limited oxygen.

Countdown – 30 seconds. *The final part. The part where he was most likely to fail."*

[Extract One, from Stage Fright, by Rosie Radford]

Another way of writing that builds up tension is to use **darkness** – setting events in the dark is a very effective way of creating tension because if the character cannot see, they are more likely to be worried about what could happen. It might be dark because it is night-time, but authors also place characters inside dark places to build up tension. The dark will add to the feeling of uncertainty and the unsettling atmosphere.

For example: The second story in *Stage Fright (The Ghost Light)*, opens in darkness:

"It was pitch black in the theatre.

Mo stumbled along the passages, working her way towards the stage. She ran her fingers along the wall until she found the wooden stairs that led upwards.

As she ascended, she saw the 'ghost light' – the light left on the stage when the theatre was empty, to help people see in the darkness.

It stood on its metal frame like a solitary guard."

[Extract Two from Stage Fright, by Rosie Radford]

A dark situation will also force a character to use their senses of **hearing**, **smell**, **touch** and **taste** and describing these other senses (what the character can hear, smell, feel etc) can also be a great way to increase tension.

Authors can use different types of writing style to build up tension.

Detailed descriptions and using **powerful verbs** can create an eerie atmosphere which will increase the tension and therefore the reader's anticipation of what is to come. Descriptive techniques such as **similie** and **metaphor** are also good ways to create a detailed description.

In the example above, the light on the stage is described as being "*like a solitary guard.*" Use of the word "*solitary*" reminds the reader that Mo is all alone in the theatre – and the light is a "*guard*" – on the lookout for the danger which, in the darkness, we are now anticipating.

Good writers also try to vary the pace of their writing, for example by using longer or shorter sentences.

For example In story one of *Stage Fright (A Perilous Act)* the old theatre is described. The author uses **powerful verbs** and a deliberately short sentence at the very end of the description:

"Huge it was, at least 100 feet wide and half as deep! Glittering gilt arches towered above and a thick velvet house curtain hung down which was just the same colour as the seats. Blood red."

[Extract Three from Stage Fright, by Rosie Radford]

Cliffhangers

Cliffhangers are another great technique to create suspense. They can be used to create suspense at the end of a chapter or section: a good cliffhanger should leave the reader desperate to know what happens next, and keen to read on.

For example: At the end of chapter six in story one of *Stage Fright, (A Perilous Act)* the main character, an escapologist, has just three minutes to escape from an underwater tank, before he runs out of breath. The chapter ends with this cliffhanger – and notice also how the author uses short phrases and sentences to accelerate the pace.

"James needed to open the latch of the trap door to complete his escape. The latch was shaped like an elbow which would spring open to the touch on the small thumb-sized lever.

So far he had kept his fear under control. He had not panicked.

Everything had worked.

But now, as he slid his fingers around the walls to find the latch – as he grasped it – as he pressed – it wouldn't move.

He rattled it. Then pulled – his fingers slipped off. It was jammed!

James rolled his head back. His ears were ringing. He was beginning to see yellow lights. He was starting to fade..."

[Extract Four from Stage Fright, by Rosie Radford]

To find out whether James makes it out alive, the reader must read on to the next chapter.

Ellipsis

Authors often use an ellipsis [...] when they are offering some information to a reader, but also not the whole picture. Ellipses are also used when an author wants to create anticipation or tension about what happens next... just as in the example above, where they are used to help create the cliffhanger at the end of the chapter.

Hints and clues

Hints and clues are used by authors to increase the reader's curiosity: by giving the reader some information, but not too much, it makes the reader more interested as the writer leaves them trying to work out what is happening. The author is careful not to give everything away and the reader must carry on with the story to find out more and to see if their guesses are correct.

For example: In chapter four of the second story in *Stage Fright (The Ghost Light)*, the reader gets hints and clues about two of the mysterious characters in the theatre company, Mr Slivver and Lulia:

The theatre crew loved Lulia because every Thursday she would cook for them. Which meant that on that day at least, they weren't hungry.

No one asked where the meat came from, but everyone knew Mr Slivver had something to do with it. Lulia delighted in seeing the Company appreciate her cooking and she described the creation of each dish in great detail.

"This, I make from fresh pig meat. I choose the very best from the back of pig and cut so and so."

And then she would make chopping movements with the flat of her hands, indicating areas on Big Tam's hips, as though paring flesh from his bone. It always made the crew laugh.

At this point, Mr Slivver would pull out hunks of meat from a large sack, running his fingers over them very slowly before he handed each piece to Lulia. Sometimes Mo would spot him licking his fingers clean, while Lulia continued:

"Now I take a slab of meat, and beat it, like so and so."

Lulia's large fists would bang onto the top of her dressing table.

Then I cut it into cubes, big, nice and neat, and deep fry in pig fat.

Delicious! Got to keep you boys strong!"

And she would smile in her best, dazzling theatrical manner.

When the food was ready, she always did and said the same thing. Lulia raised her arm, and ran a finger along her throat, with her tongue licking her blood red lips.

"Now let's eat! And you all share in the honour of the killed pig!"

Meanwhile Mr Slivver would stand behind Lulia and rub his hands together, nodding and slurping. He would distribute the plates of food, his tall frame stooping over the actors and crew as he put his hand on their shoulders. And Mo could swear that sometimes his splayed fingers strayed towards the jugular vein in their necks."

[Extract Five from Stage Fright, by Rosie Radford]

Comprehension 1: the key ingredients of mystery and suspense writing



Read the discussion notes above - The key ingredients of mystery and suspense writing with examples from Stage Fright, by Rosie Radford.

Based on the information provided in the discussion notes answer the following questions.

- Why do authors use suspense in their stories?
- Where is suspense always used in a mystery story?
- Explain how tension is used in stories.
- List five of the techniques that writers can use to build tension in their stories. Now, for each technique, find an example in one of the previous extracts from Stage Fright (there are several examples in each). Copy out each example you have found.
- What is a cliffhanger?

Comprehension 2: in the following extracts from *Stage Fright* by Rosie Radford, find the key ingredients of mystery and suspense writing.

Several techniques are used in each of the extracts.

Underline the word, sentence or phrase that illustrates the technique and make a note of which technique is being used it in the margin provided, next to each extract.

Don't forget that sometimes, more than one technique is being used at the same time.

Techniques to look out for in Extract One

- Detailed descriptions using:
 - powerful verbs
 - similies and metaphors
 - depictions of what a character's senses other than sight are experiencing (eg touch, sound, smell, taste)
- Hints and clues about that is more to the characters that meets the eye

Techniques to look out for in Extract Two

- powerful verbs
- use of darkness
- depictions of what a character's senses other than sight are experiencing (eg touch, sound, smell, taste)
- Hints and clues about what might happen/what might have happened
- Ellipses

Extract One. From Chapter One of A Perilous Act, Stage Fright, by Rosie Radford

Dan screwed up his eyes. He was in a large hall which was glaringly bright and icy cold. The hall had a high black ceiling, with lights that winked down at him like stars in a dark sky.

A huge chandelier hung down, so full of dust that the hundreds of glass droplets seemed like a vast luminous cloud.

Before him were two identical staircases, one on each side of the hall, connected by a walkway across the top. Faded carpeting swirled down the stairs to a marble floor. And right in the middle, nestling under the walkway, was curious kiosk – it had windows on three sides, a cone-shaped roof and pillars of grey and gold marble at each corner.

The words 'Box Office' were etched in ornate letters over the middle window. And there, with his head barely reaching the counter, stood Jas.

He was peering at something inside the box office and the mobile was hanging limply in his hand, the game quite forgotten.

Joining his brother, Dan found himself starting into the face of an old man who was sitting behind the middle window. The old man stared straight back at them. His eyebrows, white and wispy, hung over his eyes which were set deep into a face so saggy it seemed to swallow up his mouth. A badge, slightly askew, was pinned to his jacket – the word 'Commissionaire' was stamped on it – and he was so still that both boys wondered for a moment if he was actually alive. But then he jerked forward and slid open the glass. A whiff of stale air escaped from the window.

"We are not open," said the man, in a voice that was slow, deliberate and creaking.

"D'you show films?" asked Jas.

Dan gave his brother a warning kick in the shins.

The man in the box office sighed – a long low sound like wind echoing around a disused factory.

"This here is the Empire Royal." His voice became stronger.

"No! We do not show films. We do have the most astonishing and curious stage acts as you have ever seen."

He pointed to the wall behind him.

It was covered in peeling posters with dusty cobwebs hanging between them.

One proclaimed:

Make a note below of the techniques used

Mr. WILLIAM WILKINS ESQ

Presents

THE DARING AND DANGEROUS ACT:

James Scampara

the most Breath-Taking

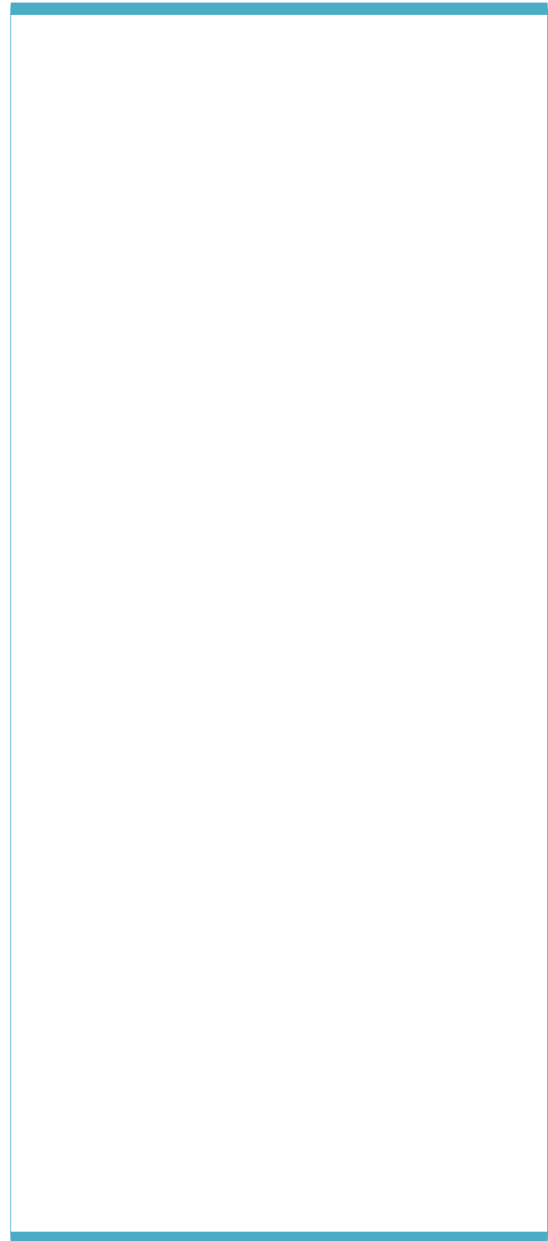
Escape Artist

in The World

For three nights from Thursday April 15th 1899.

*His daring Aquatic Act to be performed on just one occasion,
on the **last night only**.*

*And beside the writing was an ink drawing. The picture
showed a man tied up with chains and trapped inside a
wooden box, which was submerged in a large tank of water.*



**Extract Two. From Chapter Six of *The Ghost Light, Stage Fright*,
by Rosie Radford**

**Make a note of the
techniques used**

In her boredom Mo began thinking about the voices outside her window that morning. One of the voices had sounded like Mr Slivver and the other...could that have been Lulia? The more Mo pondered, the more certain she became. Yes...

She jumped up, suddenly sure of herself. This was not like her uncle: he would never willingly leave Mo during an attack. She resolved to go and find him, air raid or no.

And so Mo snaked out of the basement in the dark, began to feel her way along the walls.

The ghost light had revealed a large pale bag, high up in the loft above the stage, hanging from a thin line. Mo had to scrunch up her eyes to see it, but it was definitely there.

As she climbed the scaffolding to the loft she could hear her own breathing – rapid and shallow. Above her, the bag swayed slightly. Mo lifted her arms as far as she could and wrapped her hands around the upright pole, then wrapped her feet around it too.

She flexed her feet, pushed upwards with her legs and pulled with her arms.

As she shimmied up the narrow pole, she steadily worked her way further from the light pooling on the stage below. The blood was rushing in her ears and she felt a trickle of wet smearing the palm of her hand.

With her feet splayed on the horizontal bars, she was nearly up to the bridge – the wooden platform used by the riggers when they needed to operate equipment.

Now she had a better view of the hanging object. She was on a level with it and it was beginning to look more...solid.

Less like a bag, more like – yes! A person shape – wrapped up like a parcel!

It was swaying slightly back and forth.

Mo stared hard and felt a stab of sickness. She thought she caught a glimpse of a shadowed face on the parcel.

Placing each foot carefully astride the girders that formed the corner of the scaffold tower, Mo stood. Reaching forwards she caught the edge of the platform and hauled herself up. She slithered onto the solid floor and began to crawl along the platform, the rough wood scraping her bare hands and feet.

A slight sound came from below and she stopped, straining to hear. Two voices, faint but coming nearer, floated up to her. The very same voices that she had heard outside her window earlier that morning.

Mo moved cautiously forward along the platform. She stopped where she could see the two figures as they entered the pool of light thrown out by the ghost lamp.

A long thin shadow dated along the stage and was joined by very large, squat one that spread – like Lulia's skirt. And indeed it was Lulia! Lulia and Mr Slivver. They spoke, heedless of being overheard, believing everyone else to be in the basement.

Lulia's voice had an urgent tone.

"Those little piggies you took from the farm – they are ready now Cyril. Beautiful! Fat! I have strung them up on the loft bar." Here she gestured upwards to the fly loft and Mo drew back, her heart thumping.

Creative Writing: write your own suspense or mystery story or descriptive passage – choose from one of the pictures below to use as a starting point and inspiration for your story or description.

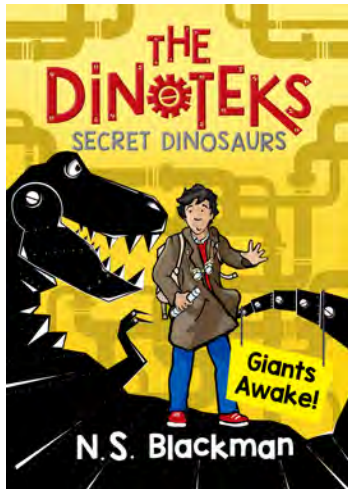
The three images below are all from *Stage Fright*, by Rosie Radford

Remember, your story or description can use some or all of the key ingredients of suspense and mystery writing – writers sometimes use more than one technique at once but they rarely use all of these technique simultaneously, instead they space them out.

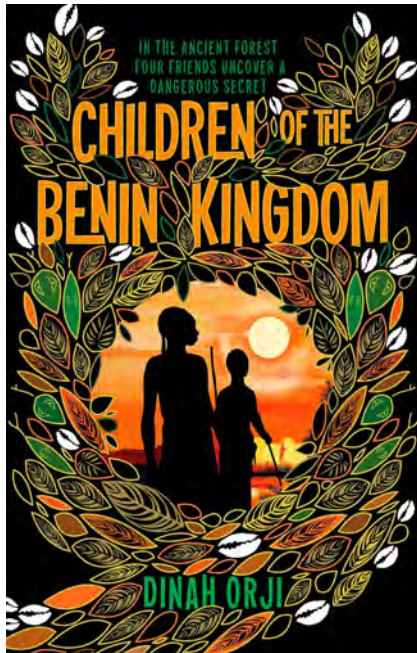
You can compare your writing with the stories that the author wrote, in the book of *Stage Fright*.



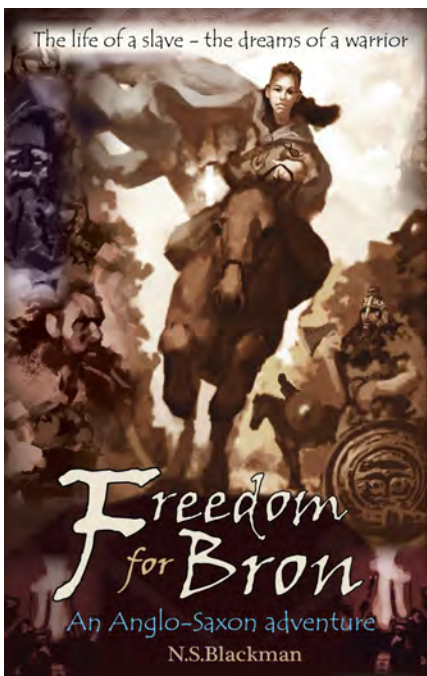
For more free, downloadable resources linked to page-turning chapter books that are suitable for ages 7 - 14, visit www.dinosaurbooks.co.uk



Perfect for the KS1 and LKS2 dinosaur topic with fun literacy and art activities.



Linked to the KS2 and KS3 Benin topic, and suitable for ages 7 - 12. Literacy, craft and art activities along with a useful map and timeline to help pupils locate the Kingdom of Benin.



Linked to KS2 Saxons topic. The resources include art, creative writing and literacy activities.