Halloween Stories & Campfire Tales
Six key tips on how to create and tell scary stories for every audience

Using these six techniques you can create and personalize a scary story you may then use to thrill any audience.

If you want a challenge for your next creative writing project, write a story that's full effect is only found in telling it before an audience. That's how a scary story should be. It's a challenge, but it can also be well worth the effort. You may have already looked for the perfect scary story to tell around a bonfire or at a Halloween party. Perhaps you looked through many classic ghost stories and other haunted books. Or maybe you searched on the Web for zombies, ghouls, slayers, and other scary things, but just couldn't find something that personally fit the experience you want to provide your listeners. Making your own story may be the only way you can now pacify your urge to share in a scary experience personalized for your group of friends.

Scary stories are unique in several ways that make them perfect for personalization: 1) they should have their own dynamic interaction with each audience; 2) they must be relatable, even believable; 3) they focus on one fear above all others; 4) they have specific scary story elements that must be included; 5) they use pacing and voice intonations to control effect; and 6) they rise in action right up to the end, specifically emphasizing and focusing in on a great conclusion.

Considering your audience

Before you choose to tell any story you must consider your audience. How old is the youngest person in your audience? Your tale should be tailored to the person who is mostly likely to get scared. Fears reveal themselves early and if you play off of it, then it will likely spread to everyone else. But even if you don't scare everyone, if you can focus in on at least one person's fears, it will still definitely make it fun for everyone else. The biggest mistake a person telling a scary story can make is to try to scare everyone. It causes you to go over the top. More gore does not necessarily make for a scarier story. If everyone could relate to your story and would allow it to overcome their belief system, then we would all be walking around in fear everyday.

What a person fears is personal so the storyteller won't discover it until it is evident that you have struck fear in the listener. Scary stories are interactive like that. Watch for signs that you are reaching your audience. Look them each in the eyes at times. Watch for them to uncomfortably change positions, burying themselves even deeper into that blanket or behind a friend. But be considerate enough to realize that a good scary story is also enjoyable.

We all like the intense response of a good thrill, but your goal should not be to gross anyone out, desensitize people, or cause them disturbing thoughts. You don't want them to fear you, just your story. The most difficult part of creating or telling a scary story is to

make it so that the audience experience the unsettling feeling, even realizes some of their darkest fears, but without making them become evil or dark themselves.

Choosing your story

Different stories have different effects on people. When you create a scary story it is important you keep in mind what scares you and why it might scare others. You are only scared of things that you think are possible. That is the same for others. Unless your story is within the realm of people's belief system, it will not scare them. Again, what might scare one person may not scare another. So create a dozen scary campfire stories to choose from to best match different audiences. There are many things that your story can be about. Consider everything that people are afraid of: aliens, the dark, creepy crawlies, tight spaces, intruders, murderers, and ghosts. Now think of ways to make that fear relatable and believable. If you can write the story as though you experienced it, you can tell it in that way. The best scary stories often come from an experience that actually scared you. Your audience will not only believe it, but will be able to imagine that it could have happened to them.

Focusing your fear

Combining different fears is only effective if the tales make sense within the same story. Being stuck in a cave, fighting insanity of hearing voices real or imagined, can easily be combined with a fear of spiders, especially when droplets from the caves ceiling create that sensation on your skin. But don't haphazardly throw aliens into the mix unless you can make it work. The most believable stories focus on the most believable fears—the everyday type fears. Unless you have someone who is actually being abducted by aliens, you likely won't scare those of us who don't believe that happens. So focusing your story on aggrandizement like that is not likely the best choice. But one way to make fears that seem larger than life, appear scary is if you are convincing enough that the character involved, preferably you, actually believes the story. "X-files", for example, was a television hit, not because we all believed in aliens, but because Mulder did. It made us suspend our belief just enough to consider how scary it would be, if that reality really were true. But the point here is to focus on one fear above all other possible fears that arise in your telling of the story. Everything should move toward one base fear. If you want to explore other fears, write other stories.

Including specific story elements

Every scary story has elements that give people goose bumps. That's their appeal. Don't forget it. Your audience will expect a certain reaction from your story. The story, the way you tell the story, the sounds of the words, and the words themselves are all important.

Your audience expects things to go wrong. Your characters will often make choices your audience would not make, but this is precisely what puts those characters in bad circumstances. Still be sure to make the bad decision believable. If you use foreshadowing to clue your audience into something that the character in your story

might not actually know, it is a perfect way to lead the character into unsuspected danger while giving your audience the pleasure of expecting the inevitable. Tease the audience with this material. It is actually more effective to put a character in danger of dying, rather than killing them off at the first opportunity. As the danger gets closer and greater, the fear will mount. While you can't be afraid of the possibility of people dying in your stories, it is not a necessary element—just the fear of that possibility (of the most extreme case unfolding) must be there. But the challenge remains to do a scary story in good taste, because the ultimate goal isn't to scare someone out of their minds (so they fear you), unless you're a psychopath (whose goal that is), but rather to allow your audience to enjoy the thrill of your scary story with you (and enjoy you, leaving them wanting for more).

Using voice intonation and pacing

Write short and sharp sentences. You will find that writing a story to be read and writing one to be told are vastly different. Some suggest that you write snappy catch phrase lines to use throughout the tale. Perhaps to a young audience it would be effective to keep attention, make it interesting, and memorable if they can latch on to words that emphasize key parts of the story: such as sounds heard, like a "thump thump thump." Generally these words do refer to sounds. For an older audience, you may reference repeating actions or sounds, but you may not want to trivialize the event by using the same wording. Focus more on pacing and creating similar feel and sounds that accompany a similar occurrence in the story. Rushed pacing is good when the character is fleeing inevitable actions and fear is rising within the character. But slow down at times and use pauses effectively. When your audience gets really silent and hunkered down before a key part of the story is expected to happen, a good pause would get their heart racing. Slow down the story for a moment to describe how slow the character feels locked in this moment. Your voice intonations should match the excitement appropriate to each situation. It takes a lot of practice to tell a story well, and you may find yourself rewriting stories to better match the telling.

Emphasizing the conclusion

The last thing you need to do to make your story effective is to focus everything on the main point of your story and then only reveal its outcome at the end. You may think that this is common sense in any story. But it is especially important in a scary story to save the best for last. Most stories have a rising action, and in scary stories it especially serves a great purpose to increase the action by increments, each scary part more scary than the last. Then there is a conflict to overcome. The emphasis, for scary stories as well, is on the climax of that conflict. But the difference is that a scary story does not dwell on the resolution for its conclusion. You want to leave your audience unsettled. You may resolve the main conflict of the events of your story, but it will be much better the more you can leave the overall story unresolved.

For example, the scariest story of my life time: stumbling upon bones hanging from nooses in the dark hidden basement of what I thought was an abandoned barn. The

climax: almost being caught down there by a shotgun toting stranger who couldn't release his Doberman on me fast enough (bound by its chain some 50 yards away). Obviously I didn't die. I got away. So there is a partial resolution. But since I was trespassing, I didn't tell anyone about it. And so the fear of the unknown about surrounding places and the existence of people like that—people who go undeterred—remains for me, and now maybe it remains for you, too. That's the effect of a good scary story. Happy Halloween!