

# HOW TO WRITE A GHOST STORY



From award-winning author  
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Most people love a great creepy ghost story, and the steps for writing one are the same as any other. See my worksheet *How To Construct a Great Story*. But there are some special considerations for getting the atmosphere of ghost stories right. Here are some hints and tips I hope you find useful.

## 1. WHO IS YOUR GHOST

First and most important, decide who your ghost is, and why have they decided to haunt the living. After all, there must be a good reason. We don't see ghosts every day, do we? So we know instinctively that if a ghost appears in a story there has to be an *overwhelmingly important reason* why they have stayed behind after death to haunt the living. What vital unfinished business does your ghost have?



Are they seeking *revenge*? Did someone treat them badly or hurt them while they were alive? Were they even murdered? If so, work out what happened, how and why they were hurt/killed, and slowly reveal that story to the reader.

Or is it the opposite - your ghost is returning to help someone? In Allan Ahlberg's tender and gentle *My Brother's Ghost* a dead boy returns simply to support his grieving brother. Not all ghost stories have to be terrifying.

Or perhaps your ghost has stayed behind to warn or protect someone from real danger. Is there a scary place in your story? An alarming object? A dangerous person? Is there a villain in your story only the ghost knows about?

Or is your ghost seeking love or affection? Did they miss out on that in life? Have they come back for it?

In the end, only you can decide why your ghost has stayed behind. But here's a big tip: if possible make your ghost as *closely-related to the main living characters in your story as you can*. Why? Because the closer the ghost is linked, the more likely readers are to *believe* a ghost would return from the dead to haunt/hurt/warn/help them. Plus a ghost story also feels so much more interesting and personal if the ghost is someone the living people knew well - especially if it was someone they felt passionately about, someone they loved or hated. Can you make your ghost a dead brother? Or a sister? A parent? A best friend?

Photo Victorian Girl 1840s

## 2. HOW DOES THE GHOST TELL US WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW?

One of the least considered but vital steps in ghost stories is to ask this question: *how will your ghost communicate with the living?* Too many people settle for the cliché of a white whispering ghost that drifts through walls. But remember: in a supernatural story you decide these rules. So: can your ghost even be seen? If so, does it look like us? Does it move like us? Behave like us? Can it even talk? In my novel *BREATHE* the ghosts can barely be seen, but they have enough weight to write words on the condensation covering a window.

And another point: can you link the way your ghost died to the messages it sends? If your ghost *drowned*, can you use *water* as a way to communicate? Readers love connections like this. In my novel *BREATHE* I wanted to make it as tough as possible for my ghosts to communicate. That made it harder for them, which made it *feel more real*. Go to my sheet *HOW TO WRITE GREAT FANTASY STORIES* for more on how to make your ghost feel real.

In any case, whatever kind of physical appearance your ghost has, take the time to consider the way it will communicate and what messages it wants to convey. It will make your ghost much more fascinating.

### 3. SETTINGS



Illustration Kay Nielsen

Choose carefully how your ghost died and where they died. An unusual place of death and/or unexpected way they passed on fascinates readers. Was it a car accident? On a lake? In a fire? Inside a cinema? Atmosphere and suspense matter in ghost stories, so the setting of your ghost story is extremely important. That's why so many people choose a large house. Your first reaction to that might be to ask, *What makes a house so special?* But think about all the personalities a house has. You live and sleep there, it can be comforting, but it may have many dark, unvisited parts as well. It also has a *history* you may know nothing about.

What place can you set your story to intrigue and scare your reader as much as a house? Once you've decided, come up with at least 5 ways to use that setting to develop tension in your story.

What happened here? What's its history?



What's in the attic?

Smoke and fire

Hidden rooms, to be locked in or out of

Who's in the picture?

Who is watching from the window, who's looking in?

What's hidden, what's waiting in the shadows?

What's in the cellar?

What's under the ground?

Who once lived here?

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### 4. THE MYSTERY - THE DARK SECRET

Finally, what really draws people to a ghost story is a dark mystery. A ghost story is always a kind of detective story. The reader desperately wants to know what happened to your ghost - how they died and why they are still here bothering the living - which is why you ask and answer that question yourself first. But when you write your story, readers don't want to know the truth all at once. They want you to tell them the story in slow pieces. And they will want some *twists, turns and surprises* along the way. What are your surprises going to be? Without at least one big one, your ghost story will feel incomplete.

To find out more about Cliff McNish's own award winning novels for children and young adults go to [www.cliffmcnish.com](http://www.cliffmcnish.com)



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