

**T**he perimeter fence stretched deep into the dark forest, cutting off man from beast.

*It was always a little creepy here, but Private John Hopes was used to patrolling this section. Tonight though, things were different. The forest spooked him.*

*Usually, the forest fence comforted him. Ten feet tall, nothing could get in. But what would want to? The thought*

*made him uneasy. The Cold War was as good as over, not that he or anyone he knew had ever seen a Commie in these parts. It was too far from the east and the wall. Only a few deer and rabbits out there.*

*Private Hopes had been in stationed in Germany, at the Morbach base, for nearly two years. It was a cute little town west of Frankfurt and near all those wine guys in the*

# The ‘Morbach monster’

**Crispin Andrews** explains how to dissect a text with a primary school class – using werewolf legend ‘the Morbach monster’ to explore suspense, scene setting and the fantastic.

The perimeter fence at Morbach forest







Legend has it that the werewolf reappears when the villagers at Rapperath neglect to light this shrine's candle.

Mosel Valley. He was a New Yorker, and had never seen so many trees in all his twenty three years. Its dark forests and out-of-the-way villages were always scary, but there was something going down tonight, something that he couldn't quite put his finger on. All he knew was that it made him nervous.

A noise came from behind him. Someone running. He turned, startled, but it was only Private Vinnie Russo. "What you doing man, sneaking up like that, you could give a guy a fright! Hopes complained. But he was more annoyed with himself for being so damn jumpy. Wasn't like him at all.

"We got a situation at section five," Russo said. He had a tracker dog with him – a mongrel with a shabby brown coat. "You gotta come with me." And with that, he was off. "Who'd he think he was", Hopes thought. "I don't see no sergeant stripes". But a 'situation' was a 'situation' and, these days, there wasn't much to do. If the Commies were gonna be OK from now on, the government better find them a new enemy and soon, or Hopes and his buddies would be out of a job. With this in mind, Hopes trudged after the sprinting Russo. Or was there another subconscious reason for his reluctance to make haste?

When Hopes finally caught up, all hell was breaking loose at section five. Russo was staring intently into the forest, rifle raised. Two security policemen were sitting on a carpet of fallen leaves in what looked like a state of shock. One was holding Russo's dog by the lead. The dog was barking, clearly agitated.

"Did you see it?" Russo said as Hopes arrived. "Did you see it!" his voice was incredulous, appealing to Hopes like it was something Russo couldn't quite believe.

"What are you talking about, man?" Hopes replied. "What did you see?"

"It was a wolf, man, as God is my witness, it was a wolf or a dog," Russo blurted out. "It was huge, jumped right over the fence." He pointed into the forest and something shifted uneasily in the pit of Hopes's stomach.

Hopes turned to the security policemen. One was babbling incoherently. Hopes shook him. "Tell me, man!" he demanded. The policeman stared straight into his eyes. "It's back, I looked straight at it," he said, trembling. "I remember now, the shrine was unlit - the werewolf has returned!"

### Telling stories

Openings to stories need to captivate the reader – and make them want to read on. Suspense is key – and no genre gives children a better insight into how authors create suspense than horrors and thrillers.

Thriller readers take a trip into the unknown, where the writer is master, unconstrained by the boundaries of everyday life. They meet mysterious creatures and amazing tales. But remember – the scariest stories contain an element of truth. Anything is possible, yes – but the best horror writers make the reader believe that the events unfolding really could happen.



The above story is based on a 1988 legend from Germany, known as 'the Morbach Monster'. American security forces stationed at the base claim to have seen such a beast, and tell a story of a werewolf slain in 1806 in nearby Wittlich. The creature comes back to life after the candle in a shrine, built to protect locals from the creature, was allowed to burn out. Others claim the story is a fake, dreamed up by bored American soldiers to scare new recruits, or invented on the internet by over-imaginative fans of German werewolf legends.

**To help children analyse the story, discuss:**

- **What phrases create suspense?**
- **How is the pace of the story quickened as it reaches its conclusion?**
- **What can you tell us about Hopes's state of mind?**

Withholding information is the key to creating suspense. If the story just said: 'Private Hopes was scared because there was a werewolf in the woods', the game would have been given away. There would have been no mystery in the rest of the story and, for many, no point reading on.

But it is equally important for an author to gradually reveal snippets of information and hint at, or suggest, what might be happening. If you keep a reader completely in the dark, they will be surprised - or even feel cheated - if you spring details on them that bear no resemblance to what they have read before. If, however, you suggest without

revealing exact details, you will get the reader's mind working to try and figure out what is going on. This, not blood and guts, is the key to a good horror story, thriller or mystery.

**Which words and phrases suggest that something is not right in the forest?**

**What happens when Hopes reaches section five of the perimeter fence that implies something inexplicable has happened?**

Three characters - Russo, Hopes and the dog - react differently to the situation. Each helps the reader build a picture of what they have seen. It is only at the very end of the story that the reader engages directly with the one person who has actually seen the creature. Even then, the security policeman's description is shrouded in mystery and raises more questions than it answers.

A good story opening needs enough background information to allow the reader to understand what is going on. We need to know that Hopes is an American, at an army base in Germany, during the late 80s towards the end of the Cold War. But it is important to weave background information into the story in a way that doesn't disrupt the flow of the narrative. Background information should enhance understanding of events, not take attention away from them.



A good story opening lays the foundations for what is to follow in both obvious and subtle ways. Of course the reader needs to know that there is something amiss in the woods and, eventually, that the characters believe it to be a werewolf. But if, later in the story, the witnesses are going to be accused of imagining things - if boredom and fear of an unknown wilderness are going to be used as explanations by those looking to rationalise what they don't understand and don't much like - it is important that when describing action and character, such concepts are tentatively introduced. This gives the reader something to think about later in the story, and adds depth of meaning. The reader can think: "Oh yeah, Hopes was uncomfortable in the forest", or "Yeah they didn't have much to do, so they could have made it up because they were bored".

#### How do we know Hopes wasn't comfortable in the forest?

#### Why did he and the other American service personnel have so little to do these days?

Good writers know how their story ends in advance - then plan out the best way to tell it. In my story, the shrine plays a key role, so it is introduced early on. The reader knows its relationship to the werewolf. There is enough suggestion and ambiguity to make the reader wonder if the shrine really is magic.

The same need drives the characters' actions. No one wants to be labelled impressionable, or mad - but everyone is scared to death of what they saw. These characters are tough American soldiers and know their colleagues will laugh at them if they admit to believing in foreign magic.

The dilemma between their fear and their desire to prove that they are not wimps causes internal conflict. Do they go into the forest or do they stay away? They go in of course, eventually, or there is no story! But they do so with anxiety and trepidation. All of these character details are set up in the introduction. Ask the children if they can find out how, and get them to suggest what could be added or taken away to make the introduction work better.

There is no one right way to write a story introduction. Authors can describe a character or a setting or open with a poignant phrase that hints at what is to follow.

The first line is important. It should be sharp, snappy, suggestive and to the point. Stories that start when the hero gets up, and lead us through the tedium of breakfast, the daily shower and reading the newspaper, will send the reader to sleep. Many writers start where the real story begins - and if anything relevant happened before, it can be referred to later in the story.

'He was an American, so it only seemed fair to shoot him', writes Mark Gattiss in the delightfully wicked 'Devil in Amber'. His opening line gives a hilarious insight into the main character, Lucifer Box. He is a socialite, a scoundrel and a secret agent - and is stationed in America and up to no good.

Authors can combine all these elements, whatever feels right. But they should be in control of what they are writing, and aware of what they are trying to do. They should stick to the point and make the point well. They should illustrate points if necessary, but not labour them. Readers are not stupid, and if you hint at something subtly, they'll

become intrigued. Maybe you will return to the point later and give a little more away.

My first line was: 'The perimeter fence stretched deep into the dark forest, cutting off man from beast'.

The fence is symbolic of the divide between nature and civilisation, a concept that will develop as the story goes on. For now, it presents the forest as a place where people should not go. The word 'beast', rather than 'animal', suggests something more ominous than deer and rabbits. The werewolf sighting occurs at the fence. So in the first sentence, the fence is established as a disturbing part of the scenery.

The story moves from a vague feeling in Hopes's mind to his realisation that the other soldiers could see something had happened, to the fleeting testimony of a partial witness, to someone who believes they have seen a werewolf.

#### Extension tasks

- Come up with opening lines for the pictures of the fence, the shrine and the forest.
- Put yourself at each location - what do you see, hear, smell, feel - how can you communicate this to the reader within your introduction?
- Why are you there? What is in the forest, what is it doing? What words and phrases can you use to hint at the beast's presence without giving the game away too early?
- Pick out some phrases to get across the sense of apprehension.
- Why is the shrine outside the village? Against what, if anything does it protect people from? Write the introduction to a story called 'The Shrine'.
- The German phrase *wald angst* means 'fear of the forest'. How can you create an impression that the forest is a place to be avoided at all costs?

**Crispin Andrews is a former teacher and the author of 'Meeting SEN in the curriculum: PE/Sports'.**