

Let's Write!

Writing a Ghost Story

Choose your scare level

Obviously the concept of ghosts is, in itself, scary. But there are plenty of successful books out there that contain ghosts which aren't scary, such as Robyn Peterman's *Good to the Last Death* series.

There are also lots of films and TV shows that have done non-scary ghosts, such as *Charmed*.

Then, at the other end of the scale, you have the super-scary, such as *The Nun* from *The Conjuring Universe*.

What's important is you know what your audience expects and can tolerate.

Some tropes with their roots in horror will always be perceived as scary, even if you don't intend your usage of it to be that way.

Know your lore

You need to know your ghost lore and be consistent with it. It really helps to have it written down somewhere safe so that you can't forget it.

How does your ghost appear?

When do they appear?

What do they look like?

How do they cross over?

Where do they go?

It's up to you how close you want to base your writing on existing ghost lore, and how much you want to make up.

Play with setting

There are lots of settings which are common in ghost stories, from haunted houses to ghost ships. How could you play with those settings?

Consider how ghosts interact with their surroundings. How easy is it for them to be corporeal and move objects? Does it change based on where they are?

Setting can be a character in its own right in any story, but in a ghost story, it can add a lot of depth and intrigue to what's happening.

Think atmosphere

Atmosphere is really important in a ghost story. You want people to feel the tension, and that requires a certain writing style.

Let's Write!

Work with how your brain prefers to write and edit, not against it; you'll end up with a better quality first draft that's less pressure to write.

Be visual

To bring your atmosphere to life, you want to be as visual in your description as possible.

Stuart MacBride does this brilliantly in his first Logan McRae book, *Cold Granite*. While it isn't a ghost story, his crime is the perfect balance of plot, characters, and description. The description brings the characters, world, and plot to life in a way that most writers never achieve.

You feel like you're standing in the middle of Aberdeen with the snow and wind flying in your face as he walks through the streets. But it doesn't slow the story down in any way.

When writing a ghost story—or anything where you're trying to scare your audience—it's also worth noting that sometimes, what we *can't* see is scarier than what we can. The fear of the unknown is bloody terrifying.

So, instead of showing the audience the ghost, focus on the reactions of the characters to the ghost instead.

If you watch any ghost story—and most horror films, to be honest—you'll see that the characters don't see the ghost/demon/slasher until they're about to be killed or otherwise tortured.

It usually starts with objects being moved, noises, smells, someone touching them when nobody is there, etc. This builds the tension and scare factor much better than showing the ghost right away.

In *The Conjuring*, we don't see the evil spirit until late in the film. We see shadows; we see an outline covered in an old sheet; we see a child sleepwalking. This makes the big reveal of the evil spirit more terrifying because we already know what she's capable of. If we were to see her *before* the sleepwalking, and the noises, and the throwing people around the house, we wouldn't be as afraid of her.

Research your audience expectations

Who are you writing your ghost story for? Fantasy readers? Mystery readers? Young adult readers? Children?

The genre, subgenres, and audience of your book should play a big part in how you bring your book to life.

Source: www.writerscookbook.com/how-to-write-a-ghost-story/