

THE R.L. STINE WRITING PROGRAM

TEACHING GUIDE

GRADES 3–8

Dear Educator,

As I travel around the country meeting students, so many children tell me they want to be writers. At the same time, teachers often tell me that their students—even good students—lack the skills and confidence to write clearly and well.

In this age of computers and instant information, the ability to express oneself in writing is of paramount importance. And as many educators have pointed out to me, a greater writing facility often leads to more facility in reading and to overall school success.

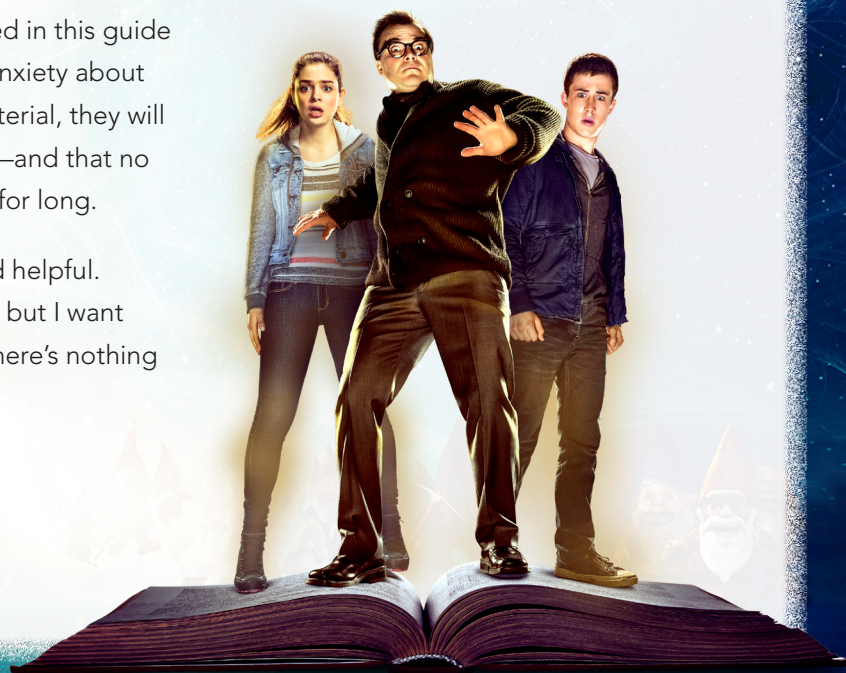
That's one of the reasons I started THE R.L. STINE WRITING PROGRAM in my hometown, Bexley, Ohio—a program where professional writers come into the schools and work on writing with children.

When I visit schools and talk to kids, they all ask the same questions: Where do you get your ideas?—and what do you do when you can't think of anything to write? There is no doubt that kids ask these questions because they are looking for help when they sit down and confront a blank page.

All of the activities and techniques I've included in this guide are designed to help students get over their anxiety about writing. I hope that while working with this material, they will learn that everyone has access to many ideas—and that no page or computer screen needs to stay blank for long.

I hope your students find this program fun and helpful. As many readers know, I scare kids for a living, but I want them to know that when it comes to writing, there's nothing scary about it!

**Have a Scary Day,
R.L. STINE**



JACK BLACK
Goosebumps IN THEATERS
OCTOBER 16

OVERVIEW FOR TEACHERS

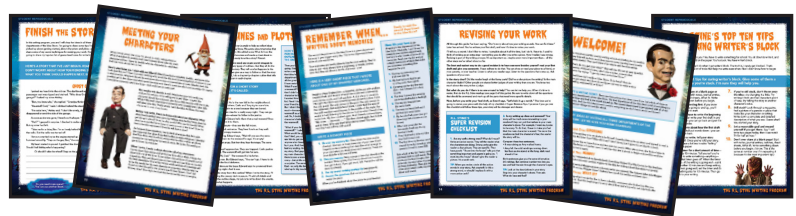
HOW TO USE THIS PROGRAM

TIME REQUIRED

Students can complete each section of THE R.L. STINE WRITING PROGRAM in two class periods per week. Or you may decide to use the program as an intensive two-week class activity culminating in the students writing their own stories.

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

THE R.L. STINE WRITING PROGRAM consists of seven fully reproducible activities designed for use with grades 3–8.



GETTING STARTED

Students can work independently, in small groups, or together as a class on the activities in the writing program.

You may want to introduce the program by leading the class in a discussion about the writing process. How do writers get their ideas? What makes a story interesting? Then distribute the first activity sheet.

THE R.L. STINE WRITING PROGRAM has been designed to help students overcome their anxiety about writing by providing a writing process that can be followed in a step-by-step manner. Popular author R.L. Stine gives tips and strategies for finding ideas to write about, developing characters and plots, and revising. There are short writing activities throughout to help students gain confidence and proficiency in writing.

NATIONAL STANDARDS GUIDELINES

The Writing Program correlates with the following standards for English Language Arts developed by NCTE and IRA:

Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world;

Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts;

Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes;

Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes;

Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts;

Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles;

Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities;

Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

CONTENT AND DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITIES

Pages 4–5: Welcome to THE R.L. STINE WRITING PROGRAM

R.L. Stine shares his tips on where ideas come from.

Activity

- Completing a story begun by R.L. Stine

Pages 6–8: Journal Writing

Students read and analyze a section from R.L. Stine's childhood journal, then write and revise an entry of their own.

Activities

- Finding an idea to write about
- Writing the entry
- Revising the entry using R.L. Stine's editing and revising techniques

Page 9: Remember When...Writing About Memories

Students read a short memory piece by R.L. Stine, then write and revise a memory piece of their own.

Activities

- Finding an idea by analyzing a list of R.L. Stine's memories
- Using a strategy to find the focus of the piece
- Writing a memory piece
- Revising the piece

Page 10: What If?

Students are guided into writing fiction by working from their journal entries or memory pieces and asking the question *What if?*

Activities

- Analyzing their own writing to find details or incidents that could be developed into fiction stories
- Writing a short creative writing piece
- Revising the entry
- Making a list of *What if* ideas they might use to write a story

Note: Teachers of grades 3–5 may prefer to do only the last part of this page—making the list of *What ifs*.

Pages 11–12: Meeting Your Characters

Students read about how R.L. Stine comes up with his characters, then begin to develop characters for their own stories.

Activity

- Working from the list of *What ifs* they created in the last activity, students create a "cheat sheet," which lists major characteristics of the characters who will play a part in their stories.

Pages 13–14: Outlines and Plots

Students read an outline for an R.L. Stine story, then learn how the outline helps to organize the basic elements of the plot of a story.

Activities

- Completing a plot and outlining a story
- Writing the first draft of their final story

Note: Teachers may find this especially suited to small group work.

Pages 15–16: Revising Your Work

R.L. Stine shares his tips and checklist for revising effectively.

Activity

- Using the checklist to revise stories and create final drafts

Note: Teachers may want to encourage students to work in pairs on the revision process.

Page 17: R.L. Stine's Top Ten Tips for Curing Writer's Block

R.L. Stine shares his strategies.

R.L. Stine would like to thank Michelle Berger, Facilitator of the Talented and Gifted Program, North Shore Middle School, Glen Head, New York, for her guidance on this program.

WELCOME!

As I travel around the country visiting schools and talking to my readers, many kids tell me how much they want to write, but they have trouble getting started. They can't think of an idea to get the story going.

"Where do you get your ideas?" they ask me. It's not an easy question to answer. A friend of mine, who's also a writer, answers that question by saying: "I get my ideas at the Idea Store."

Too bad there isn't really an Idea Store. Or is there? How do writers get ideas? And how do we figure out how to make a story interesting, suspenseful, or funny?



HERE'S A WRITING SECRET: There are three places that ideas come from. Let's think of these as the three departments of the Idea Store. The first department of the Idea Store is full of everything we see and hear and find in the world around us. The second department is jam-packed with all of our memories. And the third department contains everything we don't know about and haven't experienced—things we wonder about.

I GET MY IDEAS BY VISITING ALL THREE DEPARTMENTS OF THE IDEA STORE. LET ME GIVE YOU SOME EXAMPLES:

Department One: EXPERIENCE

Once I saw a boy getting onto an airplane by himself. I watched him as he sat down and started to read a letter. Who was the letter from? What did it say? I don't know, but it gave me an idea for a book.

The main character has to leave home and live with her cousin. When she arrives, she finds a letter in her suitcase. The letter is from her mom. It tells her that she is about to begin a secret life—and she will never come home again.

Department Two: MEMORY

For another story, I remembered my favorite book, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* by Ray Bradbury. That book is about a very scary carnival. It gave me the idea for writing a book that starts in a carnival.

In my story, a girl named Maggie goes to a fortune-teller at a carnival. The fortune-teller tells Maggie that she is evil. Of course, Maggie doesn't believe her—until the terrible accidents start...

Department Three: WHAT IF?

I started wondering what it would be like to have a double—someone who looked just like you. And before I knew it, I had the beginning of a story about Ross and a boy who not only looks like him—but says he is him!

FINISH THE STORY

In this writing program, you and I will shop for ideas in all three departments of the Idea Store. I'm going to share some tips I've picked up about getting started, about characters and plots—and share some of my secret techniques for revising your work. I'm also going to share my top-ten list of guaranteed cures for writer's block.



HERE'S A STORY THAT I'VE JUST BEGUN. READ IT, THEN YOU FINISH IT FOR ME. DON'T WORRY ABOUT HOW YOUR ENDING SOUNDS. JUST WRITE DOWN WHAT YOU THINK SHOULD HAPPEN NEXT. BUT FIRST, LET'S HAVE SOME FUN.

GHOST CAR

I poked my head into the old car. The dashboard was covered with dust, and the back of the passenger seat was ripped and stained. "Why does Grandpa Ed keep this old wreck behind the garage?" I asked my sister Ashley.

"Ben, you know why," she replied. "Grandpa thinks the car is haunted. He won't go near it."

"Haunted? Cool," I said. I climbed behind the steering wheel.

"I'm outta here," Ashley said. "I don't like smelly, old cars—especially if they're haunted." She disappeared around the side of the garage.

As soon as she was gone, I heard a soft whisper. "Ben . . . let's go. Take me for a drive."

"Huh?" I gasped in surprise. I checked to make sure Ashley wasn't playing a joke on me. But my sister had left.

"Take me for a drive, Ben. I'm so lonely behind the garage." The voice seemed to be coming from the radio. But the radio was turned off.

I let out a startled cry as the engine started up. The car rattled and clanked, and then the engine hummed smoothly. "Step on the gas, Ben," the voice whispered. "Don't be afraid. Let's GO!"

My heart started to pound. I grabbed the door handle. Should I jump out of the car? I asked myself. Should I tell Ashley what's happening?

Or should I take the wheel? Step on the gas? Take a chance?

Do you need more space?
You can use another sheet.

JOURNAL WRITING

Welcome to
department one
of the Idea Store.

How did you do on the story? It wasn't so hard, right? The idea for the story was right there. You didn't have to start from nothing. Well, guess what? You don't ever have to start from nothing—if you remember to visit the Idea Store.

Welcome to department one of the Idea Store. This is the department that's filled with everything we see and hear in the world every day. We're going to shop here today but instead of collecting our ideas in a shopping cart, we'll use a journal.

Keeping a journal is a great way to build confidence in your writing, improve your ability to use description, and, most important, to get ideas.



HERE'S AN ENTRY FROM A DIARY I KEPT WHEN I WAS 10.

Sunday, August 3

It's really hot today. Bill (my brother) and I spent most of the day just lying on the couch watching cartoons. Then after dinner—we had macaroni and hot dogs—we all piled into the car so we could drive to the Dairy Queen. Mom sat in the front holding the dog on her lap. Dino is so skinny. Miniature greyhounds are supposed to be skinny. It isn't a very long drive to the Dairy Queen, but Dino doesn't like the car so he's whining and crying. Then he starts to shake and shiver. When we get to the Dairy Queen, Bill and I get chocolate cones with sprinkles. My dad gets a milk shake and my mom gets a vanilla cone. She gives it to the dog. The waitress looks angry. Dino looks pretty funny. He eats the whole cone and we go home.

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN!

HERE ARE SOME IDEAS FROM THE IDEA STORE
TO GET YOU STARTED. TRY ONE OF THESE:

- 1. Stand in one place for 10 minutes.** Choose a place you go to often, such as the school library, or the driveway of your house, or your apartment building lobby. Jot down everything you see, hear, and feel.
- 2. Pick a special event that's coming up for you:** soccer game, birthday party, family trip, sleepover. The day of the event, jot down what happens.
- 3. Pick one hour in your life** and try to describe everything you do, see, hear, and feel.

Concentrate on gathering up as many details as you can. Don't forget smells and tastes. They are part of the world. Write the details down in a list or as notes—whatever is fast and easy for you. Then write a first draft of your entry. Don't worry about making the writing sound perfect.

If you're having trouble, try this trick: Tell the story out loud. Pretend you're on the phone, telling a story to your best friend. Once you've told it out loud, it will be easy to get it on paper.

REVISING YOUR JOURNAL WRITING

Once you've written the first draft of your journal entry, you are ready to revise. Here's my trick for revising easily: Read your entry with a pencil in your hand. Make squiggle lines next to the sentences that just don't sound right to you. Put *s next to the parts you like. Draw arrows from the parts that need more detail and write down any questions that occur to you.

Before you work on your piece, let's work on mine. I didn't include detail and description. We want to know what Dino looked like when he ate the cone. Did Mom hold it for him? Was this a usual thing for the family? What did Bill and I think about this? Describing details and feelings is the key to good journal writing.

LET'S DO THIS TOGETHER WITH MY ICE CREAM JOURNAL ENTRY.
ADD YOUR QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS TO MY MARKED-UP VERSION.

Was the day fun or boring?
Did the two of you fight?
Describe what he looks like
Was it easy or hard to decide?

How hot? How did it feel? Was it hotter in the house or cooler?

Did you go here often? Was this a special night?

Good description

Describe this

Sunday. It's really hot today. Bill (my brother) and I spent most of the day just lying on the couch watching cartoons. Then after dinner—we had macaroni and hot dogs—we all piled into the car so we could drive to the Dairy Queen. Mom sat in the front holding the dog on her lap. Dino is so skinny. Miniature greyhounds are supposed to be skinny. It isn't a very long drive to the Dairy Queen, but Dino doesn't like the car so he's whining and crying. Then he starts to shake and shiver. When we get to the Dairy Queen, Bill and I get chocolate cones with sprinkles. My dad gets a milk shake and my mom gets a vanilla cone. She gives it to the dog. The waitress looks angry. Dino looks pretty funny. He eats the whole cone and we go home.

REVISING YOUR JOURNAL WRITING

(CONTINUED)

HERE IS MY REVISION OF THE ICE CREAM PIECE. WHAT DO YOU THINK? IS IT BETTER?

August 3

Sunday. It was so hot out today, the street sizzled. The thermometer on the garage read 94. We kept a fan going, but the house was nearly as hot as outside. My brother Bill and I spent a boring day lying on the couch watching cartoons. We wanted to ride our bikes, but it was too hot. Then after dinner (we had macaroni and hot dogs), we all piled into the car for our usual drive to the Dairy Queen. That's the only thing Dad can ever think of to do!

Mom sat in the front holding the dog on her lap. Dino is so skinny. Miniature greyhounds are supposed to be skinny—but Dino is a runt! If you hold Dino up to the light, you can see right through his legs! It isn't a long drive to the Dairy Queen, but Dino doesn't like the car. He's whining and crying. Then he starts to shake and shiver.

At the Dairy Queen, Bill and I always order the same thing—chocolate cones with sprinkles. It's our favorite because we really like chocolate. Dad gets a milk shake. Mom gets a vanilla cone. She gives it to the dog. The waitress looks angry, but we don't care. This is when Dino always makes us laugh. He looks so funny because he never bites or chews the ice cream. He licks it like a person. He licks and licks until the whole cone is gone. We laugh so hard, we forget about our cones.



NOW MARK UP YOUR FIRST DRAFT THE SAME WAY I MARKED MINE.

Look for unanswered questions, details that are left out, and parts of the story you want to know more about. When you've finished, you'll have a good guide as to what you have to do. Now revise your piece. Show it to your teacher when you've finished.

REMEMBER WHEN...

WRITING ABOUT MEMORIES

Ready to visit the second department in the Idea Store?

The second department in the Idea Store is a great department because it gets bigger every day. This is the department that holds all your memories.

Your memories are terrific ideas to buy for your writing. They're easy to use—they always have a beginning, a middle, and an end. And they are about a terrific character—you!

HERE IS A VERY SHORT PIECE THAT I WROTE ABOUT ONE OF MY SHARPEST MEMORIES.

Imagine a New England inn—a beautiful, old house with endless carpeted halls and dozens of luxurious rooms and a swimming pool, tennis courts, and lush gardens. A nice place to vacation, I thought. But there was something eerie about the place: I was the only guest. The only person in the pool. The only person in the restaurant. And everywhere I went, I could feel the eyes of the staff members watching me. In the middle of the night I lay awake in bed, listening to the silence. I sat up when I heard a key in the lock. My door creaked open. And I heard a voice whisper, "My room . . . my room . . ." The door closed again, but I never got to sleep. Who was that? What did he want? The next morning I was still the only guest!

WRITE A MEMORY PIECE

1. **Go over my memory list.** Copy down the ones you've checked. Add two or three memories of your own. Don't forget to write something that describes what springs to your mind when you think about each memory. These are your clues for what you will write.
2. **Pick one memory.** Write a page or two that describes the incident. Write quickly. Don't worry about how it sounds. Just get it down. If you get stuck, talk. Pretend to tell the story to a friend.
3. **Use my secret revising markup tip** (see page 7).
4. **Answer the questions** that come to mind as you revise the piece.

When you've finished, show the piece to your teacher.

Now it's your turn to go shopping in this department of the Idea Store. Obviously, I can't know the events in your memory department, but here is a list I made of some of my memories. Read over the list and put a check next to any of them that make you remember something that happened to you.

1. Passing my swimming test (I almost didn't!)
2. My bad haircut (I had to go to a big party that night!)
3. Camping out for the first time (fun—but I stepped on a bee. Ouch!)
4. The time I scored the winning run in baseball (what a feeling!)
5. The day my dog got lost (he came back)
6. The time my friend Jeff and I got lost (we came back)
7. My favorite Halloween (we got three bags full of treats at one house)
8. Why I was grounded for two weeks (I still say it's my brother's fault)
9. How I learned to ride my bike (my dad tricked me)
10. The first time my brother and I stayed home by ourselves without parents (I tried to scare Bill)

Take a look at the list. Notice words I put down next to each event. Those words are the first thoughts that came into my mind when I focused on those memories. They give me a hint about what's really important about each event.

WHAT IF?

Welcome to the
third department
of the Idea Store.

The third department in the Idea Store is where you can find ideas about things you don't know about and haven't experienced. This is the department that makes you wonder "What if?"

I always picture this department on the second floor of the Idea Store, because it couldn't exist without the other two departments underneath it, holding it up.

What do I mean? Let's walk back through departments one and two before we take the escalator up to the *What if?* department. Take a look at the journal-writing section. Remember my entry about Dino and the ice cream cone? That entry was about what I saw and heard—what happened. But read it again. Remember the part about the waitress who looked angry when my Mom gave Dino the cone? Why did she look angry? I don't know, but I can ask myself the question *Why?* Then I can think of possible answers. Does she dislike dogs? Why? What if she hates them because a dog bit her when she was a kid? Or what if she loves dogs—but hers ran away. Seeing Dino makes her sad.

As we ask these questions, we're starting up the escalator to the third department of the Idea Store.

When I was a kid, I used to hate it when a teacher told me to "use my imagination." I never knew how to use it or make it work. Now I do. Your imagination isn't magic. It's the result of everything you see and hear and feel and remember—with the extra level of wondering *What if?*

I'll prove it to you. Go back to your journal or memory piece. Find a detail, a person, an event, and ask *Why?* and *What if?*

- Maybe there's a house you saw that had dark curtains on the windows. Ask yourself what is behind the curtains.
- Maybe someone was carrying something odd. Why? What will he do with it?

OR if nothing strikes you about your piece, try turning it upside down. What I mean is, put yourself in someone else's head. For example, in my journal: What if I could hear the dog's thoughts? What would he be thinking? What would the piece sound like if it was a page from Dino's journal? Or think about a new ending for your memory piece: What if instead of getting a bad haircut, my hair actually turned green? As I always say, there are no blank pages when you shop in the Idea Store.

WRITING YOUR *WHAT IF*

1. Work from your journal entry or your memory piece. Write down some answers to *What if* questions that occur to you.
2. Write a fast first draft that answers the questions and describes the events.
3. Read it over—or show it to a teacher or friend. Do the R.L. Stine revision markup.
4. Answer the questions you've marked up. Now revise.

CONGRATULATIONS! YOU'VE JUST WRITTEN A STORY.

When I sit down to write, I always start with *What if*. Here are some of my *What ifs*.

- What if you hypnotized your brother and you couldn't snap him out of it?
- What if you were assigned Locker 13, and it really brought you bad luck?
- What if a fortune-teller told you that you were evil?
- What if you have an exact double?
- What if you found a diary that tells you the future?

Ready to do more shopping in the *What if* department? Write down as many *What ifs* as you can think of in five minutes. (Set a timer, if you have one.)

READY, SET, WHAT IF . . .

When you've finished your list, show it to your teacher, but hang on to it. You'll need it.

MEETING YOUR CHARACTERS



When I think about the story I'm about to start, I always have a *What if* question to answer, but I don't always know who my main character will be. I have to decide who my character is—and then find out more about him or her.

Here's what helps me. I start with my *What if*. What if you had a complete double—someone who looks just like you? Then I just start thinking who would be the most interesting kind of person to put in that situation. Maybe it should be someone who is very concerned about looks. Maybe she's the prettiest girl in the class—and she's upset because now there's someone who's just as pretty. Or maybe it should be someone who's too busy—and could use an extra self.



But maybe this double is evil. Maybe he says he's really you, and you're not you. Is he telling the truth? Wait—maybe the character should be someone who has a little trouble with the truth. What if the main character is someone who exaggerates; who tells tall tales; who lies. That's where I got the idea for Ross, the main character in one of my books.

Before I can write, I have to know a lot about my character. What does Ross look like? How old is he? Where does he live? How does he get along in school? Does he play sports? Who are his friends? What does he sound like? Is he funny or serious most of the time? Does he have a favorite expression? Does he talk fast or slow?

As I answer these questions, I try to think of answers that fit in with the major trait I've given Ross that he likes to make things up. I decided that Ross does okay in school, except that he often makes up phony excuses for not having his homework done. Bit by bit, I'm starting to get to know my character.

When I write, I make a cheat sheet for all of my characters.

I write down their names and all the key facts about them. I keep the sheet with me all the time. Some writers tear pictures of people out of magazines. They put the pictures on their walls and use them as models for their characters. One writer I know used a picture of a teenage girl to be the model for his main character in a mystery. Months later he found out that the girl in the picture was Britney Spears. Don't tell Britney, okay? She might be mad that he turned her into a vampire.

MEETING YOUR CHARACTERS

(CONTINUED)

Now it's your turn.

Go back to your *What ifs*. Pick the one that appeals to you the most. Write it at the top of a piece of paper. Now you're ready to meet your main character. Think about your *What if*. What kind of character would be interesting in your story? What qualities match up with your story? Is your story about a horse? Then maybe your main character should be someone who really loves horses and has a special connection to them. Or sometimes it's fun to pick a character who's the opposite of what your story seems to be about. Choose a person who's afraid of horses to be in a horse story.

Now, start your cheat sheet. Make a list of all the important facts about your character. Add to the sheet as you come up with other characters in the story. Your main character will have friends, family, teachers, pets, etc.

HERE'S THE CHEAT SHEET FOR ROSS THAT I STARTED.

ROSS ARTHUR

- Straight brown hair, brown eyes, 12 years old
- Makes up stuff all the time, fast talker
- Lives in Beverly Hills, California
- On the tennis team

Family:

- Dad: head of a movie studio
- Brother: Jake—younger, red hair, pale skin, narrow face, 8 years old, serious—not a fast talker, Ross calls him Rat Face
- Mom: works at home, also has red hair

Friends:

- Cindy Matson: very tall, smart, pretty, and tough on Ross
- Max: big, looks like an athlete but isn't into sports—brown hair and brown eyes

WRITE A CHEAT SHEET FOR YOUR CHARACTER.

When you are finished, show it to your teacher. But hold on to it; you're going to need it.



OUTLINES AND PLOTS

Ready, gang? Let's review. We used our journals to help us collect ideas from the first department of the Idea Store. We wrote about memories that we found in the second department. We added some *What ifs* from the third department. We've met our characters and made a cheat sheet to help us know them better. Are we ready to write a story? Almost.

Before we can write the story, we need one more secret weapon to help us: an outline. There are many types of outlines—but they all do the same thing. Outlines organize the story. They tell us what happens in the story—and in what order. Outlines give us a map to follow so that the story has a plot. Before I write a book, I do a chapter-by-chapter outline that tells me exactly what is going to happen in each chapter.

HERE'S AN OUTLINE FOR A SHORT STORY I'M GOING TO WRITE. IT'S CALLED:

A Really Exciting Night

1. Edward tells the story. He is the new kid in the neighborhood. He's smaller than the others. Carlo and Tony try to scare him. They threaten to tie him to a tree because they are bored.
2. Edward says he has an idea for a really scary night. They can go to the Horror Museum—where his father is the janitor.
3. The boys say no. But Edward tells them that a real werewolf lives there. And he'll show it to them.
4. They go to the museum—they see the full moon.
5. They sneak in a back entrance. They hear howls as they walk through the dark, creepy museum.
6. Tony says it's boring. Edward says, "Wait till you see the werewolf." He takes them to the werewolf's cage. It's empty!
7. Carlo and Tony get angry. But then they hear footsteps. The werewolf!
8. The fierce werewolf approaches. They are trapped. Carlo pushes Edward in front. The werewolf will get him for sure.
9. Edward says, "Hi, Dad." The werewolf is his father.
10. The boys try to run. But Edward says, "You can't go. I have to do my job." He is the food deliverer.
11. The werewolf devours the boys. Edward says he promised them a really exciting night. And it was.

Can you picture the story from this outline? When I write the story, I'll have fun describing the creepy dark museum. I'll add all details and dialogue. But at the outline stage, my job is to write down the events. I have to decide what happens.

HERE'S MY SECRET TIP FOR HOW TO WRITE OUTLINES: FIGURE OUT THE ENDING FIRST.

Then you know where you're going. I knew I wanted to write a werewolf story. I got that idea from the memory department—thinking about all the great werewolf movies I have watched on TV. My first *What if* was: What if you were a werewolf? But I decided that I didn't want my main character to be a werewolf. I wanted him to be a normal kid. Next I thought, What if your friend is a werewolf? But I didn't like that idea so much—because being a werewolf as a kid seemed sad. So, I decided the main character's father would be the werewolf.

"What if your father was a werewolf?" I asked myself. What would be good about that? Well, you could certainly use him to get even with anyone who threatened or hurt you. And there it was. I had my ending. And so I had my story. Bad guys threaten my main character. He takes them to see a werewolf. It's scary—but at the end, there's a surprise. The werewolf is his dad—so only the bad guys wind up in big trouble.

OUTLINES AND PLOTS

(CONTINUED)

When you outline or plan the events of a story, you are figuring out the plot of the story. Most plots concern a main character who has a problem to solve. As the main character tries to solve the problem, other characters or situations make it harder for him or her to solve the problem. In the end, the problem is solved (usually).

A plot has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Usually the beginning sets up the problem. The middle makes it more complicated or tells us more about the problem. And the end resolves it.

Now it's your turn.

HERE'S PART OF THE PLOT FOR A STORY. LET'S CALL IT: RESCUE

Here's the beginning:

A boy and girl (brother and sister) go fishing in a small motorboat with their father. Something bad happens. What?

Here's the middle:

Now the boat motor is broken. A storm is coming in. They have no radio or phone. They are far out from shore. What do they do? What happens?

Here's the end:

Luckily, the boy brought something along that they use to catch the attention of another boat. And they are rescued. What is the thing he brought? What happens?

Your job is to fill in the plot. Decide what happens, and write an outline of this story.

Start with the beginning. Then add the incident that wrecked the boat and got the main character into so much trouble. Think back. Do you remember a news report you read or saw about a boating accident? Were you ever in an accident? Do you remember hearing a story of a boating trip a friend or relative took? Use these memories to figure out what happened.

Then go to the middle. Figure out what the characters did when they were stuck in the water with a broken boat. Put yourself in their shoes. What would you do?

Now you're ready for the end. Figure out what they used to save themselves. There is no right answer here. You can make up something serious or funny. Organize your main ideas by using an outline like the one I did for "A Really Exciting Night."

How did your plot work out? Did you manage to help your characters get out of a tough jam?

That's great. Now you are ready to write a story on your own.

WRITE YOUR STORY

- You're ready. You know what to do. Shop at the Idea Store for a good idea. Look at your journal, your memory piece, and your *What ifs* for an idea that sounds like fun.
- Meet your characters. Think about them and prepare your cheat sheets so you know them really well.
- Think about the beginning, the middle, and the end of your story and prepare your outline.
- Write your first draft. But before you write your final draft, let me share some more tips about revising your work.

REVISING YOUR WORK

All through this guide I've been saying, "Don't worry about how your writing sounds. You can fix it later." Later has arrived. You've written your first draft, and now it's time to revise your work.

I'll tell you a secret: I don't like to revise. I complain about it all the time, but I do it. I have to. I used to think of revising as an extra step—something you do after you write a piece. Now I realize I was wrong. Revising is part of the writing process. It's as important as—maybe even more important than—all the other steps we've talked about so far.

The best and easiest way to do a good revision is to have someone besides yourself read your first draft and give you comments. I have editors to do that. You can show or read your piece to a friend, or your parents, or your teacher. Listen to what your reader says. Listen to the questions that come up. Ask questions of your own.

Is the story clear? Did the reader laugh at the funny parts? Did he or she picture the setting? Is the main character likable? Other people are always better judges of your writing than you are. You know too much about the story to be a judge.

But what do you do if there is no one around to help? You can let me help you. When it's time to revise, first do the R.L. Stine markup (see page 7 of this guide). Be sure to write down all the questions that should be answered and mark up all the parts that need more specific details.

Now, before you write your final draft, as Emeril says, "Let's kick it up a notch." This time we're going to revise your piece with the help of my Super Revision Checklist. I promise if you go over this checklist and follow these tips, your story will be stronger and clearer.

R.L. STINE'S SUPER REVISION CHECKLIST

1. Are my verbs strong ones? What do I mean?

Verbs are action words. They tell the reader what the characters are doing. Strong verbs give the reader a clear picture. They are specific. They have punch. "I burst into the house" tells you that something important and urgent is going on. "I went into the house" doesn't give the reader a picture. It's a weak verb.

TIP: When you revise, circle all the action words in your story. Ask yourself: Is this a strong word, or should I replace it with a more active verb?

2. Is my writing up close and personal? Your story will be much more interesting to your readers if they can put themselves in your main character's shoes. For example, I want my books to be scary. To do that, I have to make you feel that the main character is scared. The more the readers can feel the character's fear, the scarier the story will be.

Compare these two sentences.

- It was raining as Amy walked home.
- Amy felt the cold raindrops running down her face as she stared at the long, dark road ahead of her.

Both sentences give you the same information (it's raining). But sentence number two lets you see and feel the rain through the character's eyes.

TIP: Look at the descriptions in your story. Step into your character's shoes. Then ask: What do I see and feel?

REVISING YOUR WORK

(CONTINUED)

R.L. STINE'S SUPER REVISION CHECKLIST (CONTINUED)

3. Does my writing have enough variety? Try not to use the same word two or three times in the same paragraph. Use a dictionary or thesaurus to find other words. But never use a word unless you are sure of the meaning and how to use it.

Don't start all of your sentences the same way. It's boring to read a paragraph like:

I got undressed. I pulled on my pajamas. I got into bed. I went to sleep.

Doesn't this sound better?

I got undressed and pulled on my pajamas. Then I tucked myself into bed. Before I knew it, I was fast asleep.

4. Are my paragraphs too long? Start a new paragraph when you introduce a new idea or describe a new action. Always start a new paragraph when a new character speaks. These little breaks make your story easier to follow.

5. Did I leave anything hanging? It's important to finish what you start in a story. You can't introduce a character, then forget to mention him again. If he goes away, the reader wants to know why.

All writers have problems with loose ends. I get mail from kids who find them in my books.

TIP: You usually have to read a story two or three times to find these problems.

6. Don't tell. Show. Which of these paragraphs is more interesting?

Paragraph #1

I swept the beam of light around the basement. I could see a large, low-ceilinged room, cluttered with cartons, old wardrobes, a battered dresser and other furniture, a stack of folding chairs, cans and jars, old newspapers piled nearly to the ceiling . . . Then . . . then . . . a human figure! A figure standing stiffly in an empty square of bare floor. He had his back to me. He wore a dark jacket, collar raised, over black pants. At first I thought it was a mannequin or clothing dummy. But then he moved. Captured in the light, he turned slowly. A boy with long, black hair. He raised a bony hand and pointed at me with a slender finger. The flashlight started to slip from my hand. I grasped the flashlight tightly. "Who—who are you?" I choked out.

Paragraph #2

When I went downstairs, it looked creepy. Then I saw a boy. He pointed at me. I didn't know who he was.

The first one is more interesting because it shows the reader what happened. The second one just tells it. The first is like a movie you see in your head. The second is just a summary.

TIP: Think about your writing as a group of scenes. The scenes are all part of a movie you want your readers to see.

Once you've revised your story, use a dictionary or spell check to correct any spelling mistakes. Now comes the best part. Let people read it.

R.L. STINE'S TOP TEN TIPS FOR CURING WRITER'S BLOCK

Does this ever happen to you? You have to write something for school. You sit down to write it, and you just can't get a word on the paper. You're stuck. You have writer's block.

Kids always ask me what I do when I get writer's block. The truth is, I rarely get blocked. That's because I've learned a lot of tricks that help me write even when I feel I don't know how to begin.

Here are my best tips for curing writer's block. Give some of them a try the next time you're stuck. I'm sure they will help you.

- 1. Don't ever stare at a blank page or screen!** Start with notes, journal entries, outlines, cheat sheets, *What ifs*. Write something down before you begin.
- 2. Know your ending first.** If you know where you're going to end up, you'll know where to start.
- 3. You don't have to write the beginning first!** You can write your first draft in any order. Then you can go back and put it in the right order.
- 4. Don't worry about how the first draft sounds.** Just put words down—you can always go back.
- 5. Before you write, tell your story out loud.** Once you've told your story, you'll have a lot less trouble "telling" it to the paper.
- 6. Set a timer for a short amount of time—**let's say 13 minutes. Tell yourself you're going to write something—anything—until that timer goes off. When the timer dings—if the writing is going well—set it for another 13 minutes and keep writing. If it's not going well, set the timer and do something else for 13 minutes. Then go back to your writing.
- 7. If you're still stuck, don't throw away the idea—**try changing it a little. Try writing it from another character's point of view. Try telling the story in another character's voice.
- 8. Still stuck?** Look through a magazine, find a picture of a person or place that looks like your character or setting. Write down a complete and detailed description of what you see. Guess what? You started your story.
- 9. Set a reasonable goal and reward yourself if you get there.** Say "I will write two pages today, then I can watch TV for half an hour."
- 10. Don't ever stare at a blank page!** Start with notes, journal entries, outlines, cheat sheets, *What ifs*. Write something down before you begin. *(I know. This is the same as number one! I'm repeating it because it's the most important tip.)*

