

# TAKE AN OLD STORY AND MAKE IT NEW

By Brian "Fox" Ellis

*"We have heard it all before, but we rejoice in the retelling." Beowulf*

*"A bad writer borrows, a good writer steals outright!" Mark Twain*

Great writers from Homer to Shakespeare, Leo Tolstoy to Toni Morrison, have borrowed ideas from the past and made them new. What makes them a great writer is that they can add their wit, their life experience, and their imagination to make it truly a new story. This works especially well with scary stories, folk tales and old myths.

You too can borrow from the past and make something new in five easy steps.

1. First, find a story you like.
2. Make a list of the five W's and H: Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How.
3. Change the details to fit your life experience, be creative.
4. Tell the story to a friend.
5. Then write your version.

The most important step is the first one. Find a story that you are excited about. If you don't like it, do you think your audience will? If you are enthusiastic, then that passion comes through. Enthusiasm is contagious. Below are two traditional jump tales. Read them both and decide which one you like best.

Secondly, you need to make a list of the five W's and H: Who, What, When, Where, Why and How. Make a copy of the chart below. Based on this traditional telling of the story: Who is in it? Where does it take place? When did it happen? What happened? Why did this come to pass? How did it happen? Most of these questions can be answered with just two or three words, a short sentence at most.

Next, change the details to fit your experience. Fill in your new section of the chart. Who do you know that is like these characters? Where is a place you have visited that reminds you of this place? Why would you or your friend do this? When could it have happened to you or your new character? Use what you know. OR use your imagination to make up a new place, a new character, a new time in history. Some things will stay the same like the major plot feature, what happened, because this is what draws you to this story.

A classic example of this is Leonard Bernstein's rewriting of "Romeo and Juliet." "West Side Story" is Shakespeare's play rewritten in modern times with gang warfare, racial issues and some great tunes. The love story and the disapproval of that affair stays the same, but now the rivalry is between two New York street gangs. Bernstein also aptly adds a lot of modern lingo. His use of slang and colloquial phrases adds heart and verve to the story.

This is the difference between plagiarism and originality. Plagiarism is simply copying from another author. It is illegal and you can go to jail, pay a \$10,000 fine or both. Originality means that you use your words, your lingo, your wit, your original twists and details. If even one sentence reads the same you are breaking the law! ***It is not OK to copy!*** Do not copy from a cartoon, a modern movie or book you read. Start with an old folktale, a classic myth, or some other source material that is in the public domain. Change the details the way Bernstein did. Change the 5 W's and H, but most importantly use your words.

You can do this. Use your dialect, colloquial phrases or the language of the time period you have chosen. The fourth step is to tell the story to a partner. If you tell the story before you write it then writing becomes easier, more fluid and more thought through. After you have filled in both sides of the chart, choose a partner and take turns telling your versions of your stories. Watch your partner listen to your story and they will make you a better storyteller and a better writer. If they look excited, curious or scared it must be good, write it down! If they look confused or uninterested, change that part of the story to make it more clear or exciting.

After you have told your story you are ready for step five: write your new version of this old tale. As you write be creative: add new details, describe the characters and setting, build suspense or add a twist of irony. Make it funnier or scarier. When you get your story done type it up, do some editing, (double-check your spelling, punctuation and grammar), and send it to me at [foxtales@foxtalesint.com](mailto:foxtales@foxtalesint.com). I might post it on my web page: [www.foxtalesint.com](http://www.foxtalesint.com).

Here is the chart to help you outline your story:

The old version of the story:

Your new ideas:

Who  
What  
Where  
When  
Why  
How

Following are two traditional scary stories, "jump tales." Use my version of these stories as an example, but change the details, (who, where, and when), to make a new version of these stories:

## THE NAIL

When I was a boy growing up in the North End of Toledo, Ohio, I had a neighbor named Jake. He was a colorful character who got along well with other people as long as he did not have to work with them. So Jake was self-employed.

Jake was a stocky guy, built like a tank, and he could fix anything. Give him a roll of duct tape and a hammer and he could build you anything you could imagine...or so it seemed. He was always around when I needed help fixing my bike.

Jake used to buy old cars and fix them up and sell them. Sometimes he would get a rust-bucket for a few hundred dollars, fix the dents, add a coat of paint, supe-up the engine and sell it for a few thousand dollars. He also bought old houses and fixed them up. Today they call it 'flipping a house.' Jake told me about a house that he once bought that he thought was haunted.

He said: "It was an old farm house on the edge of town. It looked like it had been abandoned for years. The windows were broken out. There were holes in the floor and holes in the roof. I got it for a song.

"After I signed the papers the realtor told me it was haunted. I laughed. I did not believe in ghosts. When I went to the hardware store to buy some lumber and drywall, paint and roofing, I told the hardware guy about the house. He turned pale white and stammered, "You did-did not b-buy that house did-did you? It, its haunted. Something t-t-terrible happened there m-many years ago."

"When I asked him what it was he wouldn't tell me. He just said, "D-don't sp-spend the n-night alone."

"Well, I did not have a choice. At that time I would live in the house as I fixed it up. That way I did not have to pay rent. The first day I fixed up one room as my bedroom. There was no electricity or gas so I used a camp stove to cook my supper and a flashlight to read by."

Jake then turned to us kids and said, "I still read every night before I go to bed. Do you kids read every night?" I nodded. He said, "Readers are leaders and don't forget it." I didn't.

Jake went on with his story: "I forget what I was reading that night, Edgar Allen Poe or Steven King or something. I love a good ghost story. Just as I was getting to the scary part of the book I heard it...(make a scratching sound), a strange scratching kind of noise. It is hard to describe, but it was coming from upstairs. I was not scared, well maybe a little, but I was more curious than scared.

"I grabbed my flashlight and headed up stairs. Squeak, squeak, squeak. Those stairs sure were noisy. When I got to the second floor I heard it louder, closer. Whatever it was, sounded like it was in the ceiling. I did not know the place had an attic. I looked around and found some of those folding ladder type stairs that you pull down from the ceiling. I reached up to grab the string, pulled down and AAHH! \*

"A bunch of dust, dirt and leaves fell into my face! I was scared, too. The sound, whatever it was, was definitely louder, closer, and it was up those stairs.

"I shined my flashlight up there but I couldn't see anything. I d-did n-not b-believe in g-g-ghosts.

I headed up those stairs. Squeak... squeak... squeak... ARGH! \*  
I STEPPED ON A NAIL!

And a squirrel ran out the broken attic window!

## HE GOT OUT

I have a friend who lives on Prospect near one of Peoria's largest, oldest and most beautiful cemeteries, Springdale. My friend works second shift at a factory on the other side of the cemetery, so every day at about three o'clock he walks across the graveyard to get to work. But when he gets off work at midnight, he thinks about walking the long way around.

What would you do?

Walking around means walking almost two miles, versus walking less than half a mile through the cemetery. He has made the walk five days a week for thirteen years. He cuts through the graveyard.

One night as he was walking home just after midnight, there was a gentle rain, more like a heavy mist. He could hardly see where he was going, but he knew his way and could walk the paths with his eyes closed. As he walked along-AAHH!\* He fell into an open grave!

This grave was not here when he went to work in the bright light of the afternoon! He tried jumping out but kept falling back down. He tried climbing, but the walls were slippery mud because of the rain. How do I say this nicely? My friend is vertically challenged, not very tall. No matter how hard he tried he could not get out. Well, he figured there would be a funeral in the morning and someone would come along and let him out. They would get a scare, but at least he would get out, if he could last the night. Because it was damp and cool he curled up in a small ball in the corner to conserve his heat. He tried to sleep.

About two o'clock in the morning, at closing time, he heard someone else coming through the cemetery. They were quite loud and seemed to be singing some Irish drinking song. The song was getting louder and closer. When - - AAHH!\* This other guy fell into the grave. This other guy was freaking out. He was screaming, jumping, and trying to claw his way out! The muddy walls caused him to slip and fall repeatedly. In his panic he did not notice my friend curled up in a ball in the corner.

My friend decided to play a little joke. In his scariest, loudest voice, he said, "Tr-r-r-ry and tr-r-r-ry, but you will never get out! Ah-ha-ha-ha!"

Oh, but that other guy, he got out!

*\*Prior to this point I talk quieter and slower and then make a loud scream! If your timing is right when you scream, the audience will jump! I usually get two good jumps from both of these simple jokes!*

© 1998 Brian "Fox" Ellis \* Fox Tales International