Stealthily, Jo crept down the stairs, dodging the fourth step in case it creaked. At the bottom she paused, but all that she could hear was a silence that filled the house with sleep. The cat wound its way round her legs, begging to be let out.

Twenty minutes later, she entered Deadman’s Forest. Tall trees towered overhead and daylight filtered through the branches, casting ebony shadows. It wasn’t long before she came to the ruins of the old mill. The pond glittered in the sunlight. A few bees buzzed busily.

Jo sat down under the trees and watched as the dragonflies flitted across the surface of the mill pond. It was here that she had first seen the unicorn. All morning she waited, till in the end her eyes closed and she slept, dreaming of crystal towers and goblins. Later, she woke with a start. The sun had
slipped behind the trees, casting charred shadows across the water’s oily surface. A cold breeze whispered through the reeds. Jo shuddered. A twig broke, leaves rustled and something moved towards her! What was it? Cautiously, Jo stared into the darkness between the trees where her imagination warned her anything could exist. A vague silhouette darted! Again, Jo shivered but not from the cold for, at that moment, she heard a sudden hiss and a red eye flickered. Jo gasped. With her dreams of unicorns left behind, Jo ran. Branches whipped at her face and brambles tore at her feet. She was sure that she could hear something behind her, feet thudding through the undergrowth. Something breathing…. It was only when she reached the road beyond the tree line that she stopped. She stood, listening, but only her heart thudded. The trees were quite still. Nothing. Silence. It was as if the forest had swallowed its secret.
LETS GET STARTED

This story is sufficiently dramatic to hold the attention of most children and has a simple pattern that can be re-used to create new versions.

You could kickstart the unit of work by showing images of old forests, trees with twisted roots and dark shadows. Look at photos of mill ponds so that the children can visualise the story. Show the title, ‘The Old Mill,’ and ask them what they think will happen in the story. Then reveal the opening line: ‘Stealthily, Jo crept down the stairs, dodging the fourth step in case it creaked.’ Which words are suggesting that Jo does not want anyone to catch her? What might she be going to do? Should she be going out?

Learn the story

The story is an easy one for the children to map and learn orally, whether ‘word-by-word’ or retold in the children’s own words. One simple way into the story is to split the class into seven small groups, giving each one of the paragraphs to learn orally. They should map their paragraph and use actions to help commit the words to memory. After 20 mins or so, each group performs in turn so that the whole story is revealed. This should work, as all the paragraphs are about the same length.

Keep retelling the story over a number of days so that everyone comes to know it intimately. Make sure that the children retell the story with expression. This is easy enough to achieve if you model reading expressively. Ask them to vary the pace, add in dramatic pauses and vary the volume for effect.

Use drama to hot-seat Jo before the event and afterwards. In role as Jo, hold a phone call to a ‘best friend’ about what happened or write her diary entry, describing the events. Role-play the scene when Jo arrives home and meets her mum or dad. Discuss how Jo would be feeling and how a parent might react.

There is an obvious invitation to write the prequel that tells how Jo had first seen the unicorn by the Old Mill. This need not be a whole story; it might just be a few paragraphs. It could be written as a story, a diary entry or a letter to a friend. Put the children in pairs, with one in role as Jo, to tell the story of how she had stumbled across the unicorn as a precursor to any writing.

Look for clues

Once everyone can retell the story well, read it through, pausing to discuss any vocabulary that might need further exploration. Notice how the mood changes at the mill. Initially, it sounds quite pleasant but this alters rapidly once Jo wakes. How does the writer achieve this change in mood, at first lulling the reader into a sense of security before building the tension?

Initial description: Daylight filtered; Pond glittered; In the sunlight; Bees buzzed busily; Dragonflies flitted.

After sleeping: Sun had slipped behind the trees; Casting charred shadows; The water’s oily surface; A cold breeze; Whispered through the reeds.

Read through line by line, checking for clues to how Jo feels as well as inferring what she might be thinking (see Fig. 1 for examples)

List any questions about the story that the children raise and select a few for discussion, e.g. Did Jo really see a unicorn? Why has she not told anyone about such an amazing discovery? Should she have? What might her reticence to tell anyone suggest about the others in the house? What chased her? What should she do next?

Children could write a ‘blurb’ for this story, in 50 or 100 words; design a simple front cover for the book of which this story is the opening chapter; write a newspaper report of 200 words, revealing why the mill is deserted; imagine that Jo finds the unicorn, and write a set of instructions to help her look after her new pet.

Fig. 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quote from the original</th>
<th>Jo’s feelings</th>
<th>Jo’s thoughts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stealthily Jo crept</td>
<td>Anxious</td>
<td>I hope I’m not caught.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dodging the fourth</td>
<td>Careful</td>
<td>I need to be quiet as possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She paused</td>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>Have I been heard?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twenty minutes later</td>
<td>Relieved</td>
<td>Thank goodness I’m here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The pond glittered</td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>This is so pretty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She… seen the unicorn</td>
<td>Anticipating</td>
<td>I might see the unicorn again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All morning she waited</td>
<td>Patient</td>
<td>It’s worth waiting.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Get ready to write

The better the children know the story, the more likely they are to be able to use it successfully as an underlying pattern for their own versions. Spend time deciding where to set the class story and use photos to build the imagination and make the writing easier. I have used images of old warehouses, abandoned hospitals, wrecked airfields, an old farmhouse and even a dilapidated school.

With the children, work out the underlying pattern in the story. Use this as a planner so that everyone uses the same sort of story pattern and idea, but each final narrative is unique. I created the following example with a class in Croydon:

1. (Main Character (MC) leaves the everyday setting.)
   Jakub leaves the caravan where his family is having a holiday.

2. (MC arrives at the new setting. It sounds safe.)
   He goes down to the sandy beach where there is a cave.

3. (MC waits for something magical but sleeps.)
   He is sure that he saw a merman there, but falls asleep waiting.

4. (MC wakes. The setting seems more ominous. MC hears/senses a hidden threat.)
   He awakes and the waves have cut him off so he has to shelter in the cave where he senses something.

5. (MC hears/glimpses something alarming. It gets closer.)
   It gets closer and he has to go deeper into the cave.

6. (MC flees and is chased)
   He finds a stone staircase and begins to climb higher.

7. (MC escapes)
   Luckily, he finds a way out.

Create a toolkit

The ideal focus for this story is suspense. Work with the children to find out the techniques that the writer uses to build tension (see Fig. 2 for examples).

Make it your own

Use shared writing to create a class version of the narrative, followed by the children creating their own stories, emerging over a number of days. Less confident writers might make only a few simple adjustments; whilst the more confident should move away from the original model, working directly from the basic story idea and structure. Compare these two openings, written by different children.

One child hugs closely to the original, using the sentence patterns and ideas as support. The other uses the basic idea of a main character sneaking out, but otherwise does not use the original model at all. Confident writers should produce several paragraphs for each section.

A Cautiously, Hamid sneaked down the wooden staircase, dodging the bricks his brother had left out in case he tripped over. At the bottom, he stopped but all he could hear was the fridge making a humming noise. The dog wagged its tail because it wanted to go out.

B Emily waited at the edge of the playground, tucked behind the gym while everyone else filed in after break. She stayed quite still as she could hear Miss Maynihan walking across to the school office. As soon as the playground was quiet, crows drifted. Emily was ready.