SETTING THE TONE OF YOUR SPOOKY STORY . . .

Start with the atmosphere and setting. Any location you pick can become “spooky” if you use the right language and imagery! Here’s an example using a carnival. Carnivals can be fun, loud, bright and chaotic, right? But couldn’t we change the way we describe a carnival to set an eerie, almost frightening tone for our readers? We sure could! Check out these two examples:

**Example 1: Not Spooky**

*The sun beats down on my shoulders and the playful tinkling of the music at the funhouse echoes through the park. The smell of popcorn wafts past my nose, making my stomach growl. No. No food and no funhouse. Not yet. I have something else planned first. Something better than popcorn, or cotton candy, or even those weird mirrors in the funhouse that make everyone look lumpy.*

*The Falcon!*

*Shrieks of excitement echo into the air, followed by the thunderous whoosh of a roller-coaster plummeting down a steep drop. My hair whips back as I stare, open-mouthed at The Falcon. It’s the carnival’s newest roller-coaster. Zero to sixty miles per hour in three seconds. Six loops. Dozens of drops.*

*I can’t wait to go on it!*

**Example 2: Spooky**

*The park surges up into the gray sky in a mess of twisted metal rollercoasters and monstrous rides. Shrieks of terror drift on the humid breeze. The gentle tinkling of music plays in the background, coming from a large red and white striped tent labeled “funhouse”. It’s eerie, that music. Soft like it doesn’t need to compete with the other sounds here, but loud enough that you can hear it anywhere you go in the park.*

*I don’t know why for sure, but I don’t like that music. The hair on my arms and the back of my neck rise up, warning me that the funhouse tent is bad news. It looms like a striped giant against the blackening sky, a rumble of thunder in the distance making it seem even more ominous. I take a step forward, then pause. What’s inside the funhouse tent, and why does it seem anything but fun?*

Okay, let’s take a closer look at both carnival samples. What do you notice about them? How do I take the same setting and make it feel so different?

\*discuss\*

Here’s some tricks I used:

1. Weather. Guess what? Readers are naturally put in a spookier or darker mood if the weather in your story is spooky or dark! It’s true! A sunny day is a lot less eerie than an overcast day and if you add a little thunder here and there, voila! You have already started making your scene scarier! Now, do you always need bad weather? Nope! Not at all. You can make even broad daylight scary if you use the right language and descriptions.
2. Speaking of descriptions, my descriptions of the rides in both examples have a different feel, don’t they? The roller-coaster in example one sounds fun and exhilarating, while the description in the second example sounds a bit more frightening. You can do this, too! Try to look at everything you are describing from different angles. I bet if you try hard enough, you can see the same object in many different ways!
3. What about the way my main character is reacting to his/her surroundings? In example one, how would you describe the reaction? Excited? Exhilarated? How about in example two?

Now time for the fun part! It’s YOUR turn! Here is an activity that will help you develop your spooky story writing skills:

Look around the room you are in. Find an object – any object. Examine it thoroughly, then consider how it would look to you if you’d never seen it before. In fact, what if you walked into your house and discovered that object in your room, sitting on your bed, but you had no idea where it came from or who left it there? Write two samples of that same scene – one of them not-spooky, and one of them spooky!

Don’t forget to check out the rest of the Spooky 101 toolbox, guys! There’s a five senses activity, and more writing prompts!

Dictionary of phrases:

* Atmosphere: the pervading tone or mood of a place, situation, or work of art.
* Setting: the place and time at which a play, novel, or film is represented as happening.