

## Session 8: Planning a portal story

There are only a few underlying story types, and a portal story is somewhat iconic. Nearly all portal stories follow a similar pattern:

• Main character (MC) finds magical portal and enters new world
• Describe new world
• MC explores this new world and encounters a problem
• MC has to escape and return through the portal
• MC cannot find portal again (sometimes has brought back a memento of new world)

Once you have identified the pattern of the story, the possibilities are endless. Let your imagination run free as the aim is to brainstorm lots of ideas and then decide which captures your interest as a writer. In today's session, see how many different portal stories you can come up with. If you want, you could base our story on what is happening now, where suddenly we seem to have walked through a door and found ourselves in a completely new world where we are trapped behind our front doors. Before you start, take a look at my top tips.

### Top tips for story writing:

- Start in a world/a setting that you know well – it is far easier to describe something familiar to you, e.g. a garden, your school, your local town, etc.
- Aid your imagination by using a stimulus for the new world – an image will help you focus in on the detail and describe what is there.
- Either choose an everyday character or one that you are familiar with (e.g. one you have written about before or one based on one you have read about in another story).
- Let your ideas flow – don't worry about spelling, handwriting or presentation ... you can go back and edit this later.



Here are a couple of ideas to open your mind to the world of possibility:

Underlying Pattern	Story idea 1	Story idea 2
Main character (MC) finds magical portal and enters new world	Ellie is playing in her Grandmother's garden and notices a small fairy door. Touches door and shrinks/ enters.	Josh and Archie playing hide and seek in their house. Archie opens hatch to eaves and discovers new world.
Describe new world	Arrives in an underground world full of caves, giant toadstools and magical creatures.	Transported to life onboard HMS Victory in Tudor England.
MC explores new world and encounters a problem	Ellie explores new world and enters an area strictly forbidden. Picks magical flower.	Ship is thrown into battle.
MC has to escape and return through the portal	Alarms sound and Ellie runs. She is chased through the magical world by unknown threat and escapes.	Archie desperately searches for portal and way back to own world.
MC cannot find portal again (sometimes has brought back a memento of new world)	Ellie cannot find fairy door again, but the cut flower lives on forever reminding her of her journey.	Archie escapes with small pouch of gunpowder in his pocket.

### Your turn:

Using the boxed-up pattern above, plan a few portal stories of your own. How many different stories you can come up with? You may like to draw upon your own personal experience as well as your wider reading and imagination.

## Session 9: New worlds

One of the challenges facing an author of a portal story is when the new world is one outside of our own reality and our world that we know. Whilst fantasy allows us to tap into the world of possibility, it also can lead to low-level writing. The trick is to use an image or stimulus and look closely at it, noticing the elements that catch your eye and are interesting to you as the reader.

The following worked example, based on my story idea 1 above, will show you how to generate ideas, build description and imagery, and then turn this into a setting description.

### The stimulus:

#### Step 1: Focus in on the detail

Look closely at the image and decide what elements are worth describing and exploring further. These will normally be things that you find your eye being naturally drawn to. In this image, I would want to explore the toadstools, the scaffolding staircase, the cave and the light.



#### Step 2: Generate language and ideas

Take each item in turn and brainstorm any vocabulary that each evokes. Jot down all of the ideas, no matter what pops into your head. Remember, it is often the random ideas that eventually prove to be the most fruitful.

Cave	Toadstools	Scaffolding staircase	Light
vast	neon	entwined	blistering
secluded	domed	snaked	bright
empty	jellyfish	spiral	piercing
hungry	umbrellas	helter-skelter	penetrating
jagged	glisten	swirl	blinding
brittle	glow	whirl	harsh
rough	charred	twirling	intense
lonely	leathery	steely	severe

### Step 3: Extend the imagery, focusing on words and their effect

Once you have tuned into the vocabulary that surrounds the image, play with creating short poetic lines. To do this, consider what the items are like or what they are doing. By playing with these ideas, you are in fact exploring figurative techniques such as simile, metaphor and personification. Remember – this is poetry, so focus on each word and make sure it earns its place. Here is an example based on the brainstorm above:

Hungry and alone, the **cave** waits;  
Jagged teeth poised in anticipation.  
Neon **toadstools** glow;  
Jellyfish umbrellas glistening in the darkness.  
Like a helter-skelter, a snaked **staircase** swirls,  
Seeking solace from the harsh, blistering **light**.

### Step 4: Turn the poetry into prose

Now the trick is to hang the narrative onto the poetry. To do this, practise telling the story orally first without the worry of sentence construction, spelling and transcription. It helps if you try to show the new world through the eyes of the main character, as we explored in session 6. In this instance, I am describing what Ellie can see as she enters her underground world. Notice how the opening sentence helps to set this up and how the references from the poem have been used to lead the narrative (shown in bold below).

Ellie gazed upon the world that lay before her. There, swallowed within this monstrous cave, was the only sign of life. Giant **neon toadstools** rose up out of the water like **jellyfish umbrellas**, their rings of purple light illuminating **the darkness**. **Like a helter-skelter, a snaked staircase** entwined itself around shards of rock that seemed to bore down like **jagged teeth, poised in anticipation**. A shiver ran up her spine; she knew this was not the world she longed for in her dreams, but the **harsh, blistering** heat from the sun behind her left her with no choice – she had to go on.

**Your turn:** Either using an idea from one of your plans from session 8, or using one of the images below, create a short poem that focuses on the interesting detail. Then, have a go at turning this into a short piece of prose, as illustrated above.

## Session 10: Writing the story



You now have all of the tools required to write your own portal story. You may like to write about a more traditional portal that leads you to a magical world, or you may prefer to draw upon your personal experiences, as we have explored throughout this unit.

To recap on all of the prior learning:

- a. Consider what the door represents in your story. Not only is this a portal into a new world, it is often an exploration into a character's personalities, their flaws, their inner thoughts. Reflect back on sessions 1 – 3 and consider what the door in your story represents and make sure this is pivotal in the story.
- b. What lies on the other side of that door is up to you. Allow yourself the opportunity to write about what interests you and what is important to you. Look back at your plan and make sure that this is the story you want to tell. If not ... change it! Remember – use a stimulus to help you tune into the detail and bring the new world to life for the reader. Reflect on sessions 4, 5, 8 and 9 as inspiration.
- c. A portal story explores the relationship between a main character and a door that presents itself in their life. This can be both physical and metaphorical. Help the reader empathise with the character by tuning into their thoughts, their decisions, their inner conscience. Look back at session 6 for inspiration.
- d. Great writers 'magpie' and learn from other great writers. Reflect upon the portal stories that you have loved reading and consider what made these so engaging. Try to bring in some of these skills and techniques into your own work. For example, the prologue to *The Snow Walker's Son* – session 7.

- e. Finally, enjoy it. Writing is all about sharing a passion for words, stories and the world of possibility. If you love the story you are writing – so too will your reader.

**Your turn:**

Now write the portal story that is brimming inside of you, drawing on all that you have learned. Don't forget to share or publish your work – great writing deserves an audience!

*This workbook has helped me learn ...*

*Happy reading and writing!*