

## Writing Stories

*by three 12-year-old students and one teacher, written in two hours flat.*

“Writing stories isn’t fun.” That’s what year 7 said as they started the lesson. “We want to do something fun” they had asked. It was the last lesson of term and they were bored. Bored of comprehension, bored of grammar and, most of all, bored of school. The Easter holidays were coming up and Sofia was saying, in her slightly fierce way, that school was terrible and that it was a violation of their human rights that they had to be there. Mr Rose reasoned with them that since it was the last day of school, very soon their human rights would no longer be violated, and then they would be quite free. They were, however, going to write a story over the next hour, and after that they would be allowed to play the online literature games they liked. This English lesson was a double period, first thing on a Tuesday, which Bruno always thought was a cruel piece of scheduling.

Joaquín grinned. He liked writing stories, but only if the story was written in a group and only if he was the one who did the writing. “Can we write them in a group and can I do the writing?” Joaquín asked. Mr Rose said that they could. Mr Rose was a bit distracted. He was still thinking about his journey to work. He had woken up late and it had been a rush to get there on time. On the bus he had seen a man who had one eye which was completely white with no pupil. It had reminded him of a particularly scary episode of a spy series which he used to watch as a child. But the man on the bus seemed nice and this reminded him of his grandfather who had been blind at the end of his life and had also been nice.

Sofia put her hand up. “I’ve just found Tony’s comprehension, Sir.” Everyone sighed. Tony wasn’t here. Tony was in Miami. He had already been whisked off at the weekend to start his holiday early. He had been regularly messaging their group chat with updates on his trip. The latest was what he had eaten for breakfast in a Miami beach café. Mr Rose, Bruno, Sofia and Joaquín all wished they were having breakfast in a Miami beach café. But here they all were. Writing stories. Then a thought rippled through the room. It was like a delicious smell of frying garlic which wafts from the kitchen, or a gentle wave across a beach, or an idea which passes from person to person without them really knowing how. The idea was this. One minute they were in a classroom, but then the next moment they were on Miami Beach eating a delicious breakfast. Two of them were having chocolate spread on toast, one was having bacon and eggs, and Mr Rose was having smooshed avocado. The next moment their imaginations started to fly in other directions. A huge wave smashed into Miami and Bruno began to surf a giant wave; Sofia was drawn into a group of roller-skaters on the beach and before long she was competing in an international roller-derby competition; Joaquín was picked up by a camouflaged speed boat and immediately made his way down the coast to fight the pirates and drug dealers; Mr Rose, with all of his class off on their adventures, walked down the beach to the most expensive looking hotel he could find, sat down by the luscious looking pool and promptly fell asleep. As each one of them drifted off into their different worlds, one thing became clear. In their stories, they could go anywhere.

“Right class. Does everyone understand what they have to do?”

“No” said Sofia. She was worried that if her brother Joaquín was writing, nothing would get done. And nothing was getting done. Bruno was complaining about not having any paper. Joaquín said he felt tired. Sofia asked if they could play hangman. NOTHING was getting

done. Mr Rose could feel the focus wandering. "Guys," he started. He always said "Guys" when he wanted to propose something to his class that he hoped would be exciting. "I have an idea. How about, instead of you writing the story by yourselves, since it's the last lesson of term, why don't I get involved too. We can "team-write", like writers in America write TV programmes. A group of writers sit in a room and they all suggest ideas out loud and one head writer decides which ones they should use. That's how they come up with the plot and all of the exciting twists and turns. All good?"

The class nodded their heads vaguely. They wanted to see this idea in action before they decided whether it was "all good" or not...

"So. How should the story begin?" asked Mr Rose.

"It should start in the classroom," began Bruno. "The story should follow everything which has happened so far in the classroom today!"

"And then dragons should enter the room," said Sofia.

Everyone else looked at her.

"That's a joke" she sighed.

"Although that *could* be a good way for the story to go," reasoned Mr Rose. "What does everyone else think?"

"I hate it" said Joaquín, mostly because his sister had said it.

"I hate it" responded Sofia. She looked cross. But then a light broke across both her and Joaquín's faces. They were both laughing. They often played at being annoyed at each other, but mostly they got on very well. Mostly.

"Seriously then chaps," questioned Mr Rose "How are we going to develop this story? I want you all to write down three options of where the story could go next."

The class were excitable, and as they worked, they murmured and mumbled to themselves and occasionally asked Mr Rose questions which, if they were truly honest, they didn't really need to know the answer to. Eventually, in silence, they started to properly write down their choices for where the story should go next. Mr Rose, meanwhile, continued to write the story as it was unfolding. Sofia, as usual, finished first. The others completed soon after; they didn't want to be left too far behind.

Sofia began: "The things that come from space that go whoosh and explode, what do you call them? Meterite?"

"I think you mean a Meteorite, or a Meteoroid. If it hits the earth, then it's actually called an Asteroid." Mr Rose was wrong. A Meteorite is the name for space rock which hits the earth. An asteroid is space rock which hurtles around in space. Mr Rose sometimes said things very authoritatively which, it turned out, weren't correct.

"Good. What's your next idea Soph?"

"Ines and Mr Ben come into the classroom and say Mr Rose is not able to teach us anymore."

Mr Rose gasped. "What? Right now?"

"Yes, right now."

"But why?" said Mr Rose

"Why are you calling yourself Mr Rose?" said Sofia, noticing something which had already been written in the story.

“Because normally, even though you call me Oli, most teachers get called Mr [Surname] like Mr Smith or Mr Brown or in my case Mr Rose. So, I thought, since we’re in a story and it makes it clear that I’m the teacher and you’re the students, we should do it like that.” The class had a short discussion about what Mr Rose called dramatic licence, but what to Sofia just sounded like making things up. She shrugged.

“Anyway,” Mr Rose continued, “Why would it be dramatic if Ben and Ines said I could no longer teach?”

“Because then we wouldn’t have a teacher” said Sofia finally.

“Fair enough.” It was clear the conversation was over. “What’s your last idea Sofia?”

“Bruno and Joaquín get moved down to year 5.”

Bruno was next and he rattled straight through his list:

“One: A lot of yellow cows invade the city.

Two: A shark is flying with Freddie Mercury.

Three: All the white walls became violet and a banana eats a pig.”

“Thank you Bruno, very...inventive” said Mr Rose. “I worry perhaps that these might seem a touch...unexpected. Although...” (Mr Rose always liked to see both sides of an idea)

“...sometimes when weird and wonderful things happen in stories that can be really cool. It’s called surrealism. Has anyone heard of this?” Some of the students nodded.

“Who is associated with Surrealism? Any artists or writers that you know of?”

They’d all heard of Surrealism and Mr Rose was impressed that they knew the basic principles. When he mentioned the name of the artist Salvador Dali, some of them had heard that name too. Then Mr Rose showed them some pictures of his art. Or at least he tried to. But the internet wasn’t working. It meant that the games which they were going to do mid-way through the lesson on the web weren’t able to happen. So instead Mr Rose decided that they would keep going with the story exercise.

“Hangman!” they all pleaded.

“Ok, a quick game,’ relented Mr Rose. “Then we’ll go back to the story. Before we do that though, I want to hear Joaquín’s three options.”

“Ok so, first all the buses become robots and they invade. Secondly, the interactive white board falls off the wall, starts a fire and we can’t get out of school because the door is blocked”

“What happens to us?” asked Mr Rose, somewhat concerned.

“If you want to find that out, you’ll have to choose that option and see!” Joaquín smiled coyly.

Mr Rose rolled his eyes. “What’s your last choice?”

“The third one was...it’s really good. It’s...um...Ah, I can’t remember.”

“We’ll come back to it,” said Mr Rose. “Tell me as soon as you remember. Now then let’s do Hangman,” said Mr Rose. “For Hangman, there’ll be the following rules. You each need to think of a relatively simple word for us to guess but each of them needs to be from a specific category:”

- 1) Sofia (A verb)
- 2) Bruno (The name of a country)

- 3) Joaquín (An object which you find in a classroom)
- 4) Mr Rose (A natural geographical feature)

There was a little bit of trading of categories before the class settled on these options. Sofia really wanted to do the verbs so she traded with Joaquín who clearly had a classroom object which he thought would be impossible for the others to guess, so that worked out well. Bruno, it was generally accepted, was going to come up with a difficult and interesting country. Only Mr Rose didn't really know what he was going to pick. But then again, he thought, only I know what these words are going to be used for...

Sofia had by now started drawing her hangman on the board.

\_\_\_\_\_ (7 letters)

The guessers started brilliantly. There was an "e" then an "o" and then a "d".

\_ e \_ \_ o \_ e d

Then they hit a run of wrong letters: "a", "l", "u", "c." Things were starting to look bleak for the man who was steadily appearing on the end of the rope. But then, as if from no-where, Bruno shouted: "Bestowed!" It was correct. A great guess and an unusual word. The class had recently learnt "bestowed" as part of a comprehension about Sir Francis Drake who was, according to English people like Mr Rose, a famous Explorer, or, according to Spanish people like Sofia and Joaquín, a famous Pirate.

Bruno went up to the whiteboard. He bent down to Mr Rose's ear and whispered the country's name to check that it was a real place. It was. Malaysia. Mr Rose wondered whether Joaquín and Sofia would get the answer. They had a strong start with an "a." And quickly the other letters fell into place too and before long the answer was on the board. Bruno shook his head; "I should have done Micronesia..."

Next was Joaquín and while he was drawing his hangman, Bruno told everyone about a reality TV show where all the contestants were star pupils. Everyone agreed that this sounded like a school experience which wouldn't be enjoyable. Joaquín's game began. They made some guesses far too early in the game and for a moment it looked like the group was in trouble. But then a "p" fell into place and they worked out the answer: "paper-work."

It was Mr Rose's turn. An 8 letter word and the class did well with the vowels:

\_ A \_ \_ E \_ A \_ \_

Again, without warning Bruno burst forth with the answer: "Waterfall!" he cried. Mr Rose couldn't believe it. He thought they'd never get it. Certainly not that quickly. But before Mr Rose could be too disheartened, he and the rest of the class were distracted by a strange noise coming from the cupboard in the corner of the room. It sounded like loud snoring, (Sofia suggested that perhaps Tony was asleep in the cupboard) but the noise was also combined with a high-pitched whine as if a persistent alarm clock was buzzing. They all

stopped talking. Mr Rose rose from his chair. Mr Rose rose. (He was reminded of an annoying joke at school. “Oli sat on a pin” his friends used to say. They continued “Oli rose.” It was a bad joke. Sofia agreed, “that is a VERY bad joke.”) The noise continued and slowly they all approached the cupboard.

Gingerly, they opened the door. (Mr Rose wondered if everyone knew what gingerly meant. He wondered if they could work it out from the context. Joaquín suggested “slowly” and “carefully”, and Mr Rose told him that he was quite correct, but also that there was some sense also of “fear” or even “trepidation”, which is a really great word. Sofia said it just reminded her of the word “ginger”. “Fair enough” said Mr Rose, “but if you’ve ever put ginger into your mouth whole when it’s been peeled, you’ll realise that that’s a thing you should do with quite a lot of fear and trepidation.) Now that the door had been opened gingerly, apprehensively, carefully, fearfully and with trepidation, they could see inside.

At first, the cupboard looked quite normal. There were books and pens and a writing pad and mini whiteboards. There was no sleeping Tony or alarm clock buzzing. Then the four of them noticed it. There was a glowing coming from the back of the cupboard. It looked like a phone had just turned itself on and the light was pulsing, except this wasn’t the harsh, blue, sleep-disrupting light of a screen, it was a golden, warm, comforting light, as if a soft sun had started to set in the corner. “Hold these,” said Mr Rose and carefully, gingerly, they began removing things from the cupboard. In the corner, pulsing gently at a strangely calming rate, there was a small stack of paperwork. It looked like an old pile of exercises on which Mr Rose had given them a poem by William Wordsworth. Mr Rose could just make out phrases like “inward eye” and “solitude.”

What should they do? Should they close the cupboard and leave the room? Or should they each hold a piece of the glowing paperwork and see what happens?

Sofia thought they should leave the room and go to the cinema. Bruno thought they should tear down the cupboard and see what was making the noise, while Joaquín didn’t know what they should do and asked to go to the toilet. Mr Rose knew where he wanted the story to go. He knew what *he* wanted to happen, and where the glowing paperwork might want to take them. But they would have to go with the story. They would have to engage their imaginations and just for a moment suspend their disbelief and not be too old and too cool for stories like this where magic could happen. It would only work if they agreed to go where the story seemed to want to take them, although Mr Rose did agree perhaps the story was a little *obvious*, or perhaps that it was not such a good idea to grab onto buzzing, glowing papers. They might have been radioactive. But with its beautifully glowing paper, and intriguing words and phrases, it seemed as if the very paperwork itself was asking them one final time, will you Soph, Joaquín and Bruno hold the pieces of paper and find out where it takes you?

“No” said Sofia. Everyone laughed, even Mr Rose, somewhat exasperated though he was. “How many words did you write so far” said Joaquín “If you tell me the answer, I’ll agree.” “2,200” said Mr Rose, looking at the document’s word count. “That’s a lot isn’t it!”

“Ok fine. I’ll grasp the glowing paperwork,” said Joaquín. He picked up a piece of the parchment. It seemed to be growing older, like the beautiful treasure map Tony and Sofia had made a few weeks before with the clues in invisible ink.

Sofia and Bruno held out stubbornly.

“What will make the rest of you say yes then? Soph? Bruno?”

“Ok yes,” sighed Sofia, giving way. She took a page.

Outnumbered, Bruno also took one. All four now clutched the glowing, ancient documents. Nothing happened.

Then suddenly everything went dark. It was silent. The road noise dimmed. Their stomachs dropped. It was as if they were falling and soaring upwards at the same time. There was an intense rushing sound in their ears, like a burst of rushing water, a cauldron of rapids, an explosion of the sea.

Their eyes were foggy, as if they had opened them after an impossibly long sleep. They were no longer in the classroom. They had stopped moving, but now the first thought in their heads was that they all felt damp. Hot air made their skin moist and there seemed to be spray coming from somewhere. Mr Rose’s linen shirt clung to him. Joaquín took off his fleece; he was so hot. He didn’t understand what had happened. “I don’t understand what has happened, Mr Rose? What is going on?” It was confusing certainly. But as their eyes began to swim into focus, adjusting to the new dappled light, things started to become clearer. In front of them was a huge waterfall. All around them there was a lush tropical jungle. It felt like they were in a really exotic place.

It was Sofia who understood first “Ooooooooooh! We’re in Malaysia! It’s the Hangman clues! Waterfall, Malaysia, Paperwork. But my word hasn’t yet been used. Bestowed.”

“That’s right,” replied Mr Rose, as he bestowed the final part of the lesson. “That’s the beauty of imagination. Today we have a sheaf of paperwork which transported us to a waterfall in Malaysia. But really, whenever you like, you can be wherever you want to be.”

“I should have said Quebec,” said Bruno sullenly.

Everyone laughed, a little bit giddily. It was the end of the lesson. It was the end of the term.

*This is a story written on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2019 in an English lesson with a small Year 7 group in London. We began the lesson with a blank document on my computer projected behind me. I typed the story during our two-hour lesson and the students told me how the story should unfold throughout. Much of the dialogue is what we actually said in the course of the lesson, and many of the events described are as they happened. It was lightly edited later that day.*

*The students at first found it rather thrilling and entertaining that the lesson was documented as it unfolded, in story form. They quickly adjusted to this new reality, however, and were soon making suggestions or edits to the story. I also set up exercises, such as the game of Hangman, entirely through the written story rather than speaking instructions out loud. I'd encourage any tired or brave teachers to try writing instructions to their students; it created a peculiar level of focus and, without the seemingly constant sound of my voice, they entered into a more free-flowing imaginative mindset.*

*The students were intrigued, and at times annoyed, by the changes I made to real life in the quest of making things more exciting or dramatic. Apologies to Sofia, who I made the sceptical foil of the story at some points. She was more good-natured than her words written on the page may suggest. Also, Tony should receive an honourable mention too; he loves writing a story and he was gutted to have missed out when he finally read it. So, dramatic license has been taken, naturally. This is, after all, a story. And like all good stories, there are facts and truths and fictions within.*

*The names of the students have been changed; a slightly melancholy situation, given that the piece is as much their work as mine, but privacy guidelines in schools are becoming increasingly necessary. All the students, including Tony, picked their own pseudonyms. The credit of authorship is equally shared between Sofia, Bruno, Joaquín and me. I teach them English. – Oli Rose, 29<sup>th</sup> April 2019.*