

## Michael Jackson's *Thriller* Horror Genre Tropes

**Objective:** Perform or write a short play using common horror tropes

**Level:** Advanced

**Length:** 50 minutes (without performances)

**Main aim:** Students will employ common horror tropes in a performed (or written) play

**Sub aim:** Students will practice listening skills with Michael Jackson's *Thriller*

**Assumptions:** general familiarity with the horror genre, understanding of what a trope is, previous exposure to the mechanics of writing plays

**Materials:** [Thriller music video](#), computer, projector, pencil, paper

**Classroom type:** In-person normal, in-person socially distanced, online

---

**Warmer: Discuss horror** (2 min)

**Ask:** How do horror movies make them feel? Why are they so scary (or not scary)?

Pariwork permitted: students speak in pairs to each other before group feedback

**Horror trope list** (5 min total: 2-3 to write, 2-3 min. feedback)

Ask students "What makes the horror/thriller genre scary? What are some of the recurring features or tropes of the genre?"

No pairwork:

Give students 90 seconds to write as many tropes as they can think of on a piece of paper then rank them with the most frequently used as number 1.

Pairwork permitted:

Give students 90 seconds minutes to write as many tropes as they can think of on a piece of paper. Have them compare in pairs then make a joint list of the 5 most popular tropes.

Once students have their lists, get group feedback.

Write some but not all of the tropes on the board.

Make sure you write at least two tropes that appear in *Thriller*.

Tropes in *Thriller* (non-exhaustive): boy and girl alone (in woods, with monster, etc.), car out of gas, monsters (zombie, werewolf) actually just a movie, actually just a dream, jump scare, dumb decision, dark and stormy night, dark alley, gore, haunted house, cemetery, overacting, twist ending

**Thriller Instructions + Example** (9 min total: 1 min inst., 3 min video, 3 min fb)

Tell students they are about to watch the short horror film and music video for Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. Their task is to count how many tropes appear in the video. If it was already on their list, they should check it off. If not, add it to the list. We're going to do the first scene together as an example. Watch and mark the tropes.

### **Intro example**

*Thriller* 0:10-2:52

Play video from the title [screen](#).

Stop the video at exactly 2:52 (right after Michael completes his transformation).

Ask students which tropes they saw in that clip. They will likely get the boy and girl in the woods, the car out of gas, the monster, and/or the fake ending. If no volunteers, use questions below to elicit a summary of the scene and the tropes.

What is the relationship between Michael and the girl?

Why do they get out of the car?

What does Michael ask the girl?

What does he say about himself to the girl?

Did the werewolf scene happen in reality?

**Thriller Tropes:** (10-13 min total: 9 min video, pairwork: 3 min, individual: 1 min)  
(*Thriller* 2:52-12:05)

Play *Thriller* through to the end.

If pairwork is permitted, have students compare lists in pairs. Their lists should *only* be tropes in *Thriller* and they should be ready to defend their decision.

If online, have students share (with each other in breakout rooms or directly in the single main group via text)

If pairwork is not permitted students should be given 1 min. review their lists, verify their own tropes, and prepare to explain where they appeared in the video.

**Tropes Master List:** (5 min)

Take tropes from each pair or student and write them on the board or shared screen.

Create a master list with all the tropes the class found in *Thriller*. Remember the list is limited to *only* those tropes in *Thriller*, otherwise it can become unmanageable. Make sure the list is neat and organized.

Tell students to add any new tropes to their lists. This is very important for the next step.

**Main Task: Making horror**

**Pairwork allowed, in-person in class:** (17 min. + group performance time; 2 min groups/inst., 10 min write, 5 min practice, 3 min/group perform)

Students work in pairs or threes to write a **short horror play**.

Students get in pairs or threes.

Use one list of tropes per group. This list should be complete.

Number the tropes. The numbers don't have to match the master list. Just go down from top to bottom in order.

Open the [random number generator](#)

Generate 3 numbers.

Students match these 3 numbers to the tropes on their list.

### **Instructions:**

These are the tropes that they must use in their plays. To make their plays, they should write key notes and difficult phrases, not the entire inscript. This is ultimately a speaking exercise. The entire play should be approx. 3 minutes long. They should practice the entire play at least twice before their final performance. Everyone must have a significant speaking part.

Display the [10 minute timer](#) and give students 10 min to develop their play.

At 10 minutes, announce that they should be finishing up. Give them [5 more minutes](#) to rehearse.

Groups perform their plays. Time permitting, in the same class session, otherwise later.

The audience must determine which three tropes each group was required to use.

**Online class:** (17 min plus group performance time with breakout rooms; otherwise requires work outside of class)

Students work in pairs or threes online to write a **short horror play**.

Same as above but students work in breakout rooms. If that's not possible, give them time outside of class to work together. Set a deadline for when they should record their play and submit it to you. If they meet together outside of school, they can film it together; if not, they can record the video call performance. Watch the plays together in class. The audience must determine which three tropes each group was required to use.

### **In-person, groupwork not allowed:**

Students work alone to **write a horror screenplay or narrative**.

**Version 1: Sharing papers allowed** (17 min total; 10 min write, 2 min read, 5 min feedback, volunteers share time varies)

Class works from numbered master list, not their own lists.

Generate 1 number.

Match number to the trope on your master list. This is the trope they have to use. They must write their name at the top of the page.

Give students [3 minutes](#) to write.

Pass paper to a classmate. They continue story with trope 2.

Generate 1 number.

Match number to the trope on your master list. This is the trope they have to use.

Give students [3 minutes](#) to write.

Pass paper to new classmate.

Generate the last number; students must conclude their stories now.

Give students [4 minutes](#) to write.

Return papers to the original author of the first trope (name on top)

Students read "their" story.

**Group Discuss:** Did your story go as planned? Are the second and third sections of your story similar to anything you wrote in someone else's story?

**Share:** Time permitting, have one or two students volunteer to read their stories. The audience should listen and compare their story to that being read. They will all have the same tropes but done in different ways.

**Group Ask:** What's similar and what's different about your stories and the tropes? Which tropes were easiest to work with and why? Which version of the trope did you like best?

**Version 2: Sharing papers not allowed** (17 min total: 12 minute write, 5 min feedback, sharing time variable)

Each student works from their own numbered list.

Generate 3 numbers.

Students match these numbers to the tropes on their lists.

Those are the 3 tropes students must use in their writing.

They may write a horror screenplay or narrative.

Give students 2 minutes to think and plan their story before writing. Depending on your class and how they like to write, you can either keep the 3 minute writing blocks for each trope or give them 10 minutes to organize themselves and write the entire thing. Whichever you do, display the [online timer](#).

Volunteers and Time permitting: encourage two students to read their writing. Encourage them to read it with a bit of spook if a narrative and different voices if it's a screenplay.

The audience listens to determine the 3 original tropes.

Author gives feedback on guesses.

**Group Discuss:** Which trope was the easiest to work with and why? Do you think that tropes make good horror stories? Or are they overdone?

If you would like to turn this exercise into a graded writing, collect all writings, provide feedback, return drafts and have them rewrite. You can also add any of the out-of-class group work you want.