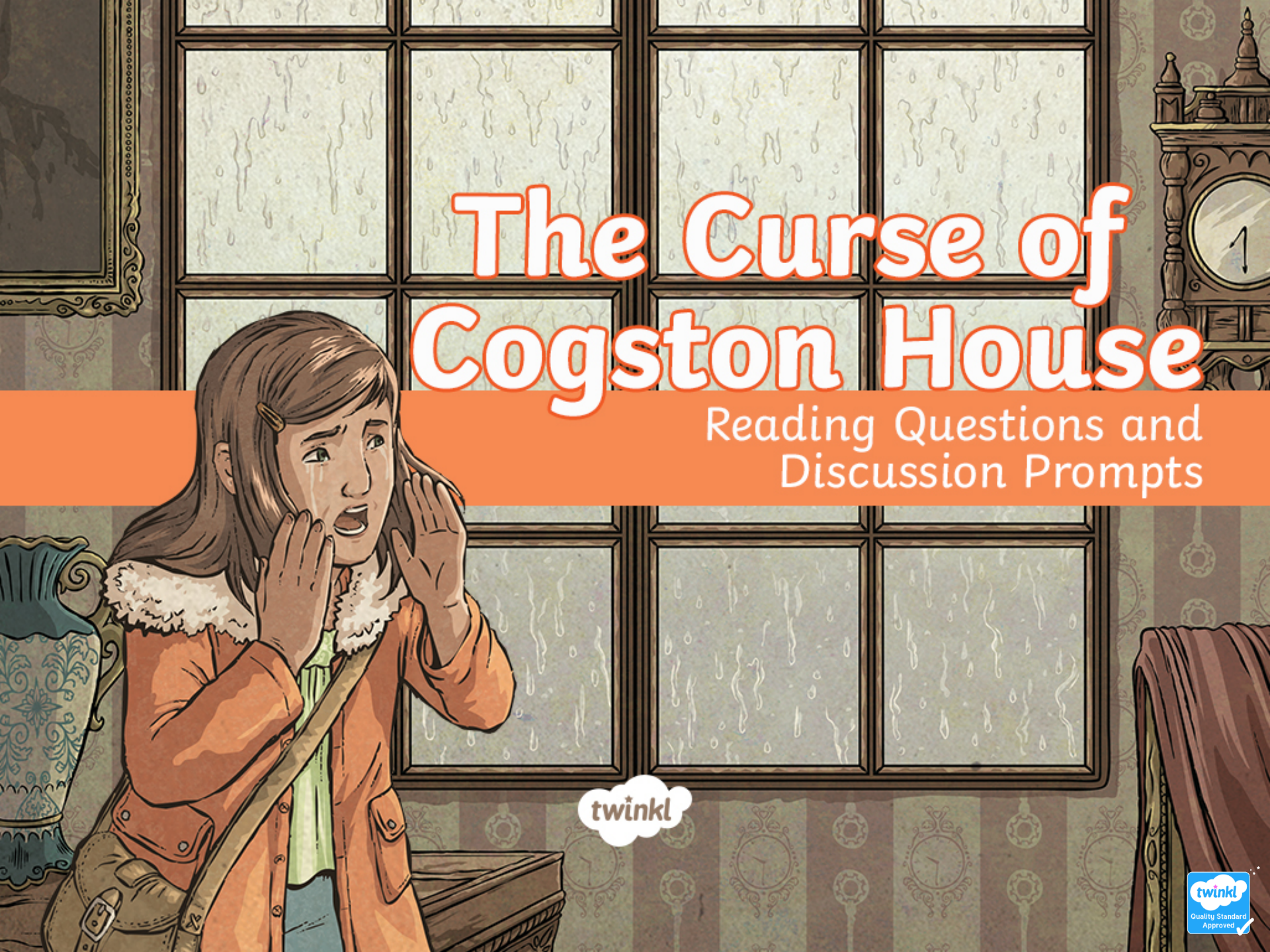
The Curse of Cogston House
Reading Questions and Discussion Prompts
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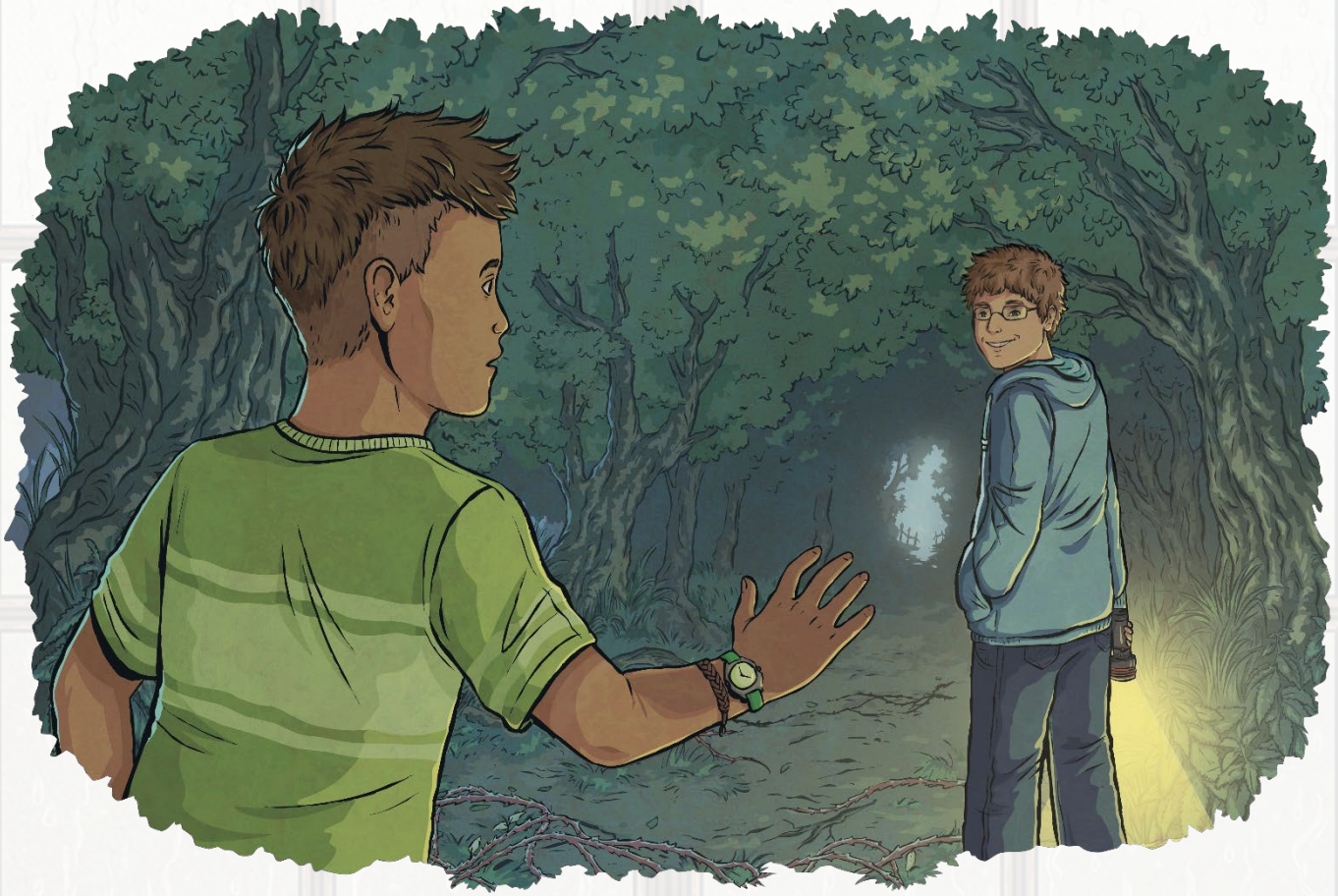
Jack strode up an overgrown path away from the park as though relishing a mission through the jungle, dodging the occasional stinging nettle with an effortless skip or jump.

"Come on, Luca. This is going to be epic!" Dipping his head and swiping away leaves like some intrepid explorer, he manoeuvred under a tree branch which hung over the narrow track.

Luca dawdled behind. Only a few minutes earlier, he had been perfectly happy practising his limited gymnastics moves upside down on the monkey bars. Now, he was torn between making the effort to keep up with his friend and deliberately getting left behind.

"Speed up – we're nearly there!" Jack called eagerly over his shoulder.

What can you tell about Jack's personality? Explain your answer.



Which boy is which? How do you know?

Luca wasn't at all sure that they should be leaving the park swings, where they had been allowed to hang out without their parents since both recently celebrating their eleventh birthdays in the same week. He was even less sure that he wanted to be venturing towards the Top End, as everyone called that part of the park grounds. He spun around to look behind him. The monkey bars were now way out of sight and the watery evening sun above was being muscled out of position by ever-darkening shades of grey, layering over each other in the sky like a collage.

"Maybe it's getting too late for today," Luca suggested hopefully. He looked down towards his watch. Scowling at the time – 10:31 – he shook his wrist vigorously. Clearly, the watch had stopped working, as it was only just beginning to go dark. He was going to need a new excuse. "We could come back tomorrow, when it's lighter. I think it's going to rain, from the look of those clouds, and Dad's making bolognese for tea. We don't want to miss that!"

Being two days older than his friend clearly gave him no superiority at all.

Can you find an example of a **simile**?

“Forget about your stomach for a minute! I can see the scaffolding through this gap!” enthused Jack, trampling undeterred over the thorny undergrowth.

Luca followed him unhappily along the gradually dwindling path. Hands up in front of himself and elbows tucked in, he was now having to place his trainers precisely onto prickly stems to pin them down with his soles and avoid any contact with his bare arms or legs.

On the other side of a tangled row of bushes, the broken-looking building loomed. Fifty-foot-high scaffolding encased the crumbling walls of Cogston House like a rusty exoskeleton. The long, metal poles, bolted together at regular right angles, seemed as though they were keeping the whole house from falling apart.

About a hundred years ago, the house had apparently been quite a grand sight, belonging to a rich family who owned the entire park. Until about thirty years ago, it had still been inhabited but for decades now, it had wasted away, shedding scraps of brickwork and hiding itself under a cloak of creeping ivy. Even from the outside, it had a look of being infested with sadness.

What do you think ‘undeterred’ means?

Everyone had a story about Cogston House. No one quite knew what was true and what was rumour, and Luca didn't want to stick around to find out.

"Ow!" he squealed, as Jack reached back and hauled him through the gap he had just made in the twisted greenery. Luca rubbed at a fresh, pale scratch on his arm.

Unconcerned, Jack stood triumphantly, his hands on his hips, admiring the enormous house. His eyes swept the building as if they belonged to an ancient explorer who had just discovered a long-forgotten corner of the world.

"Told you it would be epic," Jack grinned.

"'Epic'? Looks like it's barely still standing up."

How is Jack feeling? Find some evidence to explain your answer.

What impression do you get of Cogston House?

At home, Luca had heard his stepmum say that it was about time Cogston House was renovated, and that it would be good for the area if it was properly restored with access opened up again. In reply, his dad had said that it would be better to take a wrecking ball to it, after everything that had gone on. Luca didn't know exactly what 'gone on' meant, but he was now regretting mentioning the place at all to Jack.

The house had always been there, as long as both boys could remember, but was just somewhere that they had never visited. Of course, it had been Jack's idea to go and investigate, after Luca had brought it up that day at the swings. No doubt, Jack would know some story about the place, and if he didn't, he'd be making one up anyway.

"Have you heard the story of what happened to those two girls here?"

Right on cue, thought Luca. Here it comes.

Why are the words 'right on cue' written in italics?

“I heard it from my cousin’s next-door neighbour,” Jack went on. “Her mum knew one of the girls from school, years ago, and her grandad worked in the factory that the Cogston family owned.”

“What are you going on about?” Luca asked with a shake of his head, distracted by pulling furry goosegrass buds from his shoulders.

Before an answer came, the crack of snapping wood grabbed Luca’s attention and he looked up, eyes widening, to see Jack grinning back at him from a narrow doorway at the side of the house. The splintered length of rotten wood in his hand matched a large panel, daubed with graffiti, which hung limply at an angle where a proper door should have been.

“Come through here and I’ll tell you,” said Jack.

Can you find an example of **onomatopoeia**?

“Oh, I really don’t think we should be doing that,” Luca responded, looking around in search of any other signs of life. He flicked a creepy-crawly from his arm with his finger and rubbed manically at a telltale tickle on his head which suggested that more critters were making a new home in his hair. By the time that he’d dealt with them, Jack’s feet were just disappearing after the rest of his body into the building.

A few raindrops were released from the bulging grey clouds. Inside Luca’s head, a slow drumbeat was gathering momentum and a voice was screaming at him to turn around, yet his dry mouth barely let out a murmur in protest. Inwardly, he wished that an invisible force field would propel him backwards from the narrow opening in the doorway but instead, he swallowed hard and copied Jack’s crouching motion to squeeze through the broken door frame.

What can you tell about how Luca feels? Find some evidence.

Standing upright again inside, Luca looked around. The first thing that he noticed was the stale air, which seeped into his mouth and nostrils. Repulsed by the mouldy stench that hung in the atmosphere, he focused on inhaling through the tiniest slit in his mouth to avoid breathing it in any more than he had to. Beneath his feet, loose rubble covered the floor like that of a building site and dry leaves nestled together in dirty piles and crunched when trodden on. It was as though the outside had crept inside. Huge rugs were spaced along the hallway, not laid flat or neatly, as they once might have been – they were ruffled, folded, damp-smelling and thick with dirt. Luca shuddered at the thought of how many tiny creatures were camping out among the threadbare fibres. Looking up, Luca noted that every single window was cracked or broken. Spindly branches of a tree scratched and tapped at one high window and lower, a cool breeze whistled through a jagged hole, causing him to shiver.

Why do you think all of the windows were cracked or broken?

The hallway was darker than he'd have liked. A lampshade dangled from the ceiling at a crooked angle but there was no bulb. Instead, some light forced its way in through the many dirty windows; some found an easier passage through small holes in the walls and roof. Dust particles floated in the still air and there was just enough light to allow the boys to see the shape of the hallway and the decrepit furniture.

All around them, items from the house's former life still remained. Huge pictures in decorative frames hung on the walls: portraits of miserable old men which seemed to have been painted in shades of only brown or beige. Although Luca could see the shadowy outlines of doorways leading off from the hallway, the darkness swallowed up any objects which lay further down the corridor.

"Woah, look – a winding staircase!" Jack gasped, moving forwards through the darkness. His voice rang through the house like a siren.

Find a word which means 'worn out or ruined'.

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Can you use a **metaphor** to describe this setting?

“What about it?” whispered Luca, gazing towards the blackness at the end of the hallway. The skeletal remains of a chair sat solemnly in the corner, spilling springy insides out from amidst a rotten frame. Its back was loosely attached to the rest of its body and one splintered leg splayed out in an awkward fashion.

“Well, it’s just like in the story.”

“I still don’t know what story you’re going on about.”

Luca took short, ginger steps forwards until he was close enough to Jack to see him clearly in the dim light. Jack was running his hand, fascinated, along the weathered wooden panels of an enormous staircase which wound grandly up to yet more darkness. As he turned back towards Luca, he began to recount his tale.

*

What kind of word is ‘solemnly’? What does it add to the sentence?

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The house hasn't always been in this state. At the time when two girls, Alice and Eliza, came in here to shelter from the rain, the Cogston family had not lived in the place for years but a caretaker was still supposed to be looking after it. According to the story, he was one of the old servants who just stayed on after everyone else had left or died.

Alice was the taller, slimmer of the pair, and the more cautious; Eliza had a round face and was always the adventurous one. They were both good girls, not looking for trouble or even mischievous. They were perhaps just a little too nosy.

No walls were crumbling then or windows smashed. Everything was just still and silent. It was as though whoever had lived there had just upped and left, one day. The same gloomy-looking portraits lined the walls, watching everything that occurred beneath them.

Why does the author say that the portraits were 'watching'?

How could you describe these two girls to highlight their differences?

The girls explored a little inside, Alice following Eliza closely. They peered cautiously into the downstairs rooms leading off the wide hallway, but neither dared to venture up the spiral staircase. A fancy pair of chairs here, a mute grand piano there. Somehow, the eerie silence of the house demanded silence from them, too. Alice let Eliza lead the way, trailing only a few soft steps behind.

After only a few minutes of exploring, swallowing gulps of thick, dusty air, Alice noticed that they had gradually travelled a surprising distance from the big, heavy entrance door behind them. Somehow, the house had enticed them deeper and deeper inside. As she traipsed along behind Eliza, she realised that her feet were moving to a rhythm that had so far escaped her notice. Steady and comforting, the girls were treading to a beat, like soldiers marching in time with a drum. Alice snatched a piece of Eliza's coat to stop her in her tracks and stood silently, listening.

Tick.

Can you define 'traipsed'? Can you walk in this way?

Though their feet were no longer moving, a beat continued. Straining to listen, the girls cocked their heads and frowned at one another as the soft sound of a ticking clock reached their ears.

Tick.

The sound followed them through the house, breaking the silence wherever they investigated. As the sound of a swinging pendulum from one tall grandfather clock faded away behind them, it was replaced by a wall clock in the next room.

Tick, tock.

The eerie sounds combined to make a strangely sinister clock chorus. Aging grandfather clocks stood proudly, evenly spaced on opposite sides along the hallway, like soldiers stiffly standing guard. Each room had its own sentry, too, watching from a wall or mantel.

Tick, tock.

Why has the author started a new line for each 'tick, tock'?

The volume of one mantelpiece clock rose slightly as Alice walked by, and slowly died again as she left it behind. An approaching door, slightly ajar, allowed the resonance from another to pick up the rhythm.

Alice's footfalls had just begun to slip back into the soothing rhythm of the ticking house when her attention was drawn to the nearest exquisitely polished timepiece.

She stopped. The realisation that invaded her mind made her stomach lurch unpleasantly.

All over the vast house, thick blankets of dust clung to every item of furniture – except for the clocks.

Tick, tock.

Can you find an example of a **metaphor**?

Do you notice anything familiar about the time shown?

Alice ran a finger along the smooth edge of a beautifully ornate carriage clock, and found not a scrap of dirt on its surface. She looked up at the filthy, mottled glass of the ground floor windows, then back at the gleaming, spotless face of the clock. A few moments later, when both girls were back out on the main corridor, Eliza stopped walking suddenly. She turned her head slightly to the left, listening hard. "Listen," she whispered.

Alice stood still and silent for a moment, too. She looked back towards the staircase, tracing the line of the banister with her narrowed eyes, squinting up towards the dark vacuum above. It was impossible to focus her vision into the darkness but just for a second, she had been sure that something had moved. Her mind swam with visions of a hunched, silhouetted figure hovering just beyond the last, barely visible step. Then, she remembered that she was supposed to be listening.

"I don't think I can hear anything," Alice muttered.

"Exactly," her friend agreed. "No ticking."

Can you think of a synonym for 'hunched'?

With a sudden shiver, Alice realised what Eliza was listening for – she hadn't heard the presence of something, further away. She was listening for the absence of it right beside them.

Alice stood motionless, staring up at the nearest grandfather clock, the latest in a long line of stoic watchmen standing against the dark, panelled walls. Despite no other signs of life, every other clock so far had been working. They were even, as far as Alice had noticed, showing the correct time.

The one in front of them right now had stopped.

"10:31," said Eliza, looking back at Alice over her shoulder. The clock was either three hours ahead or nine hours behind the correct time. Eliza seemed to contemplate this for a moment and then, just as suddenly as the clock had attracted her attention, she lost interest and moved on down the hallway.

Find an example of a **fronted adverbial**.

Alice, meanwhile, stared up at the clock a little longer. Something about its silent presence was strange, but she couldn't quite put her finger on what it was. She placed one hand on the frame and leaned closer. Turning her head, she pressed her ear against the polished wooden panel, as though listening for a pulse. The silence of the house was deafening.

Seconds passed.

BANG!

Without warning, an ear-splitting sound splintered the silence, and Alice's vision went black.

*

Eliza had been creeping further along the passageway when a horrendous sound had startled her. She spun around to find herself perfectly alone in an empty hallway. The house looked exactly the same as it had a moment earlier – but Alice was nowhere to be seen.

Why do you think the author has used an asterisk (*)?

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Eliza's face contorted from confusion into panic. Her arms appeared frozen by her sides but her hands began to visibly shake. All adventurous spirit whisked out of her, she whispered meekly.

"Alice?"

Whipping her body around from side to side, she spoke again, this time louder and more urgently.

"Alice!"

Eliza directed her call, with increasing volume, in different directions. She dived in and out of the nearest rooms, all efforts to be stealthy abandoned.

"Alice! Alice!"

Frantically, Eliza screamed Alice's name again and again, fat tears forming in her eyes. She took one more look from left to right, then darted down the hallway and out of sight, back into the pouring rain.

How can you tell that Eliza is afraid? Find all of the evidence.

Why are these numbers written backwards?

Alice watched it all but could not speak.

Standing in almost complete darkness, her eyes strained to adjust. Directly in front of her face, she could see through a murky, circular window. It was so close to the end of her nose that the thick glass seemed to blur and distort the objects on the other side into gruesome, deformed versions of themselves. She blinked rapidly as her befuddled brain pieced together the picture in front of her.

She could see Eliza. Stretched and blurred by the small window, she was standing in the corridor, just as she had been only a moment earlier. The walls of the hallway seemed to curl sickeningly towards Alice at the top and bottom as she rolled her eyes around to test the limits of her vision. There was a stuffy, musty smell around her and she reached up to hold her nose –

Nothing happened. Alice's hands didn't appear in front of her. She focused hard on moving her arms from where they hung by her waist, but it was as though they didn't belong to her any more. She was rigid, but for the swivelling of her wide, panicked eyes.

Why does the third paragraph end with a dash (–)?

A cramped feeling began to smother her like a mass of vines and leaves wrapping around a tree trunk. Cold beads of sweat formed on her forehead. She watched Eliza run from door to door and heard her calling, "Alice! Alice!"

Opening her mouth wide, Alice screamed for her friend until her throat stung. She didn't need to see Eliza running away down the hallway to know that no sound had escaped from her lips.

From her prison, she watched in silent horror. Eliza had fled from the house but Alice couldn't force her own mouth to open, let alone call her friend back. In front of her wide, tear-filled eyes, on the other side of the brown glass, she could see a circle of numbers and the old-fashioned hands of a clock. A short, stubby arrow pointed upwards, and a thinner, more ornate bar hung down almost vertically.

From deep within her stomach, the desire to scream and wriggle and fight was burning like a pilot light – but it was fighting with another feeling. A terrifying thought rose within Alice as if it were freezing her from the feet upwards.

Find the **simile** in the first paragraph, and replace it with your own.

Eliza was gone. Now, she was completely alone. Trapped.

Nothing moved. Cogston House was as silent as the grave. Perhaps the only thing worse than hearing her best friend desperately calling her name was being alone in this endless quiet. Alice's eyes searched through the darkness, scouring the corridor which faded into more murky gloom. She could make out the hallway right in front of her, the door opposite, and beyond it, the enormous winding staircase. As she looked, blinking through the tears which had begun to stream hopelessly down her face, she was met with a sight at the top of the staircase which all but turned her to stone...

Something was moving.

Alice watched numbly. Her heart was in her mouth and her breath came in sharp, rattling gasps.

Count the sentences which have 3 words or fewer. What is their purpose?

Descending the stairs one careful, agonising, creaking step at a time, a hunched silhouette shuffled out from the darkness. A small, extremely old man was moving slowly but purposefully towards Alice. His head was bowed, showing a white bald circle surrounded by wisps of light grey hair.

"Help!" Alice tried to scream again, but nothing but strangled silence could be heard. With no voice but the one inside her own head, she begged the stranger to notice her and set her free...

A mottled, wrinkled hand reached forward, holding a key.

A knot twisting in her stomach, Alice held her breath, staring down at the top of the man's head. Wriggling into place, the key clicked with satisfaction. Grinding and creaking as it rotated, the key was wound once...

...twice...

...three times, a brief pause between each half turn.

What is the effect of the long list of adjectives in the first sentence?

With each rotation of the key, Alice felt her chest become tighter and her back straighten, as though a puppeteer were tugging at invisible strings. Only her eyeballs scuttled from side to side, like marbles being jiggled in a tiny box.

All at once, everything was still once again – still, but not silent. Alice could hear a pounding in her ears as her heartbeat became louder and more rhythmic. The thin sliver of a third metal clock hand in front of her face had begun to move, and as the deafening sound of her own heart ticking overwhelmed her, she had the chilling realisation that this particular clock was no longer broken.

Tick, tock.

*

What do you think has happened to Alice?

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What do you predict will happen next?

Luca stared in horror at Jack as his voice deliberately faded away for effect, mimicking ticking sounds.

"What happened next?"

Jack smirked. "Who knows? That's how the story goes. It's probably just made up."

"But the curved staircase, the hallway, the pictures! They're all here, like you described." Luca's head flicked from side to side, searching for more details to match the story. He'd never felt totally convinced about coming into the house in the first place; now, he was absolutely convinced that he wanted to leave.

The boys had not yet ventured beyond the bottom of the staircase, which opened out into the centre of the hallway. Jack seemed pleased with himself as he sniggered and kicked at a scattering of broken stones in front of his feet. Hands in his pockets, he wandered further into the grips of the building with nonchalance, as though strolling through his own house.

Why does Luca think that the story might be true?

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Luca stood frozen for a moment and listened. He daren't move for fear of preventing himself hearing a sound from elsewhere.

At first, there was nothing. Then, as he cocked his head to one side for a better chance of hearing, a faint sound broke the silence...

Tick.

All of the hairs on the back of Luca's neck stood on end.

"I've had enough," he called out. "I think we should get out of here."

"Ha! I knew you'd say that," replied Jack, wandering further down the passage.

Luca had a sandstorm swirling in his throat. Desperately, he swallowed, trying to wash away the dryness, and dithered in the centre of the passage. Every second that he hesitated, Jack edged further away from him.

Summarise the differences between Jack and Luca.

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Tick.

With each horrendous noise, Luca's breathing quickened.

Tick.

He was panting, now. Where was it coming from? Slowly, with dread filling him from toe to tip, he turned his head to track the source of the noise.

Tick.

Jack's story flashed through his head and Luca felt as if all the oxygen was being sucked out of him.

TICK.

Then, his heart in his mouth, Luca's eyes fell upon an explanation...

How many suspenseful writing techniques can you see?

The high window that he had noticed earlier was being accosted by a long branch, which was being thrown around rhythmically in the breeze. He watched, matching the ticking sound to the thin fingers of wood swaying and connecting with the murky glass.

Tapping, not ticking.

Luca breathed again.

“Hang on!” he pleaded with Jack.

While Luca had stood listening, Jack had continued to explore. Luca shook creepy thoughts from his mind like a wet dog shaking himself dry after a swim. His stomach grumbled rudely, making him wish that he was back home eating delicious spaghetti bolognese and savouring the heavenly smell of fresh garlic bread. Instead, he was still surrounded by the stinking innards of Cogston House.

Find an example of a **subordinate clause**.

Jack said that the story probably wasn't even true, Luca told himself. He followed in the direction of his friend with a little less trepidation, heading further along the hallway, deeper into the house. Hoping that Jack hadn't gone too far without him, he began to pick up his own pace even more.

As the hallway bent into a corner and Luca's walk broke into a trot, Jack loomed into view. He was standing motionless at the corner and his body had tensed.

Luca rounded the corner and stopped abruptly. When he saw what Jack was looking at, the bottom almost dropped out of his stomach.

Clocks.

Not just one, but a row of tall grandfather clocks, extending down the hallway as though standing in a queue. Creeping up the corridor towards them was a wave of soft ticking sounds.

Can you define 'trepidation' using the context to help you?

"Clocks!" Luca spluttered, taking a few steps backwards. "That's it – I'm definitely out of here."

"Wait – look at this, though," Jack responded.

Tick.

Luca was no longer in the mood for waiting or looking. Turning to the side, he began to edge back the way he had come, around the staircase and towards the first hallway.

Tick.

He suddenly felt the urge to keep his eyes on everything: his friend, the staircase, the darkness that felt like it was closing in on him. He daren't look where he was going.

Tick.

What is the effect of the repeating 'tick' sentences?

Sliding his feet crab-style along the dusty floor, he scraped through crinkly leaves which were disintegrated under his feet. It was staggering how, considering his struggle to identify the quiet tapping of a branch on the window moments ago, the crescendo of ticking was now echoing loudly through his head.

Tick, tock. Tick, tock.

"Jack!"

Jack had stepped closer to one of the clocks. "This one has stopped," he called out. "You're not going to believe what time it says..."

Luca didn't need to be told. Something inside him was already screaming the time.

"...10:31."

How does Luca already know the time on the clock face?

Jack was standing, transfixed, staring into the face of the huge grandfather clock. Still backing away, Luca threw a glance up the staircase, then back towards Jack. His friend was peering forward to scrutinise the clock. What was holding his attention? Why couldn't he just leave, like Luca was?

"Jack!"

"Yeah. Yeah..." Jack murmured. Mesmerised, he was reaching out a hand and placing it on the front of the clock.

Tick, tock. Tick, tock.

Luca kept moving, his back against one wall and his eyes constantly scanning. Jack was becoming more out of focus, blending into the encroaching darkness as Luca shuffled noisily away.

"AAAAGH!"

What is a **rhetorical question**?

Something huge and solid had collided with Luca's back. Cursing himself for not looking where he was going, he spun around and grabbed hold of a heavy clock that had appeared behind him, which was not in any danger of toppling but chimed and groaned at being disturbed. As he clutched it with sweaty palms, he felt its weighty mechanism rocking inside.

Tick, tock. Tick, tock.

He steadied himself and exhaled the breath that he hadn't realised he'd been holding onto. Turning back to face the corridor, he panted, "It's OK. I'm OK, Jack."

Jack did not respond.

Why do you think Jack has not responded?

Now you can choose how the story ends. Choose from either Ending 1 or Ending 2 and then read the one you have chosen in our ebook.

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