KEY ELEMENTS: MYTHS & LEGENDS

History:
Myths are the oldest of all story forms and are to be found in many different world cultures. They originate from a time when people relied on oral story-telling to explain natural events, answer questions about origin and creation, about life and death, to teach important values and virtues, as well as to entertain. Many have cultural importance as they are a source of knowledge about the way of life of ancient civilisations - their history, beliefs and values.

Legends are also a source of historical information about what people believed and the way they lived, but unlike myths, although they are not entirely true, they have an historical stimulus and are based on a real event, person or place. In legends, the focus is on the adventure plot rather than the message.

There are many different types of myths, but hero myths are most like legends, and this book is, therefore, based on hero myths. For example, in the tales from ancient Greece, heroes had a central role - undertaking challenging quests and embarking on dangerous voyages.
As with legends, they illustrate the importance of courage, with the hero battling against impossible odds, taking part in battles, tackling terrible creatures. They remain very popular today, and many modern day fantasy stories have their roots in myths and legends, for example - the popular *Percy Jackson* series.

**Form of entertainment:**
The success of myths and legends lies in their ability to educate, inform and entertain. They provide a sense of excitement, action and suspense by transporting the reader into a new, exciting world where there are strange creatures and supernatural powers.

**The tales often include:**
- a brave, heroic character with special powers, for whom the reader can root
- An exciting undertaking involving physical danger (quest)
- A special object or person that enables the hero to accomplish impossible challenges and quests
- A journey to dangerous, exotic locations
- A series of trials to overcome
- Life or death stakes should the hero fail
• A villain or creature to fight against
• Many twists and turns
• Fast-pace drama
• Excitement and suspense
• Rich, descriptive vocabulary
• Action sequences - battles, fights, chase, capture
• Last minute escapes and victory against all the odds

A. THE HERO/HEROINE

A hero myth or legend needs a hero that the reader wants to follow, and is capable of accomplishing awe-inspiring feats. (For ease, I have referred to the hero (he), rather than alternating between hero/heroine) He should essentially be:

• Brave and clever and either have supernatural powers or, a special object, talent or assistance that gives him enhanced powers or skills.

It is also important that the hero develops or changes in some way as a result of his experiences.
Get to know your hero:

• Collect ideas of heroes from myths and legends you have read.

• Decide on a name.

• How old is he?

• Think of details that could be used in your physical description, such as, face, eyes, voice, clothes or armour that reflect their personality, or skills.

• Add a description of any distinctive features.

• Who are his family and close friends?

• What are his main interests?

• What is his special talent/strength?

• What is he most afraid of? What is his weakness? (This could be really important to the story as you may want to make you hero face their worst fear or overcome his weakness as one of the obstacles he has to overcome.

• Does the hero or any of his family or friends have any secrets?

• What has he got to gain by achieving the task, overcoming the challenge, or lose by failing to do so?
Descriptions of heroes are not included in this book as the periods that the myths or legends could be set range from Ancient Greece to the Middle Ages to modern day and it would be impossible to provide specific, detailed vocabulary and ideas in the limited space available.

**B. THE VILLAIN:**

Opposites often occur in myths and legends, so if the hero is good and brave, he needs a villain to fight who is the opposite. The villain can be (a) human or a (b) creature and (c) both, and is usually:

a) selfish, greedy, power-crazy

b) hideous, vicious

As the villain could be a human or creature, for ease, the term **villain** (and *he*) has been used to refer to both.

It is possible that the enemy and hero share the same goal. It is their **motive** that is different. The creature may be controlled by a villain or simply terrorising an area, island, forest, mountain, cave, sea.

**Get to know your villain/creature**
• Collect ideas of villains from myths or legends you have read.

• Decide on a name(s).

• Add a description of any distinctive features.

• Where does he live? What type of place is it? Is it very secure, scary? Is it in an isolated location? How is it protected?

• Who are his allies?

• Does he have a special talent/object/weapons?

• Does he have any secrets/weaknesses? How can he be defeated or destroyed?

• What has he got to lose by the hero achieving the task?

• What does he do to people who challenge him?
C. QUEST, CHALLENGE

The hero has a problem to solve. This could be:

A. A challenge - surviving encounters with dangerous creatures.

B. A journey - across a dangerous setting, for example, a sea, mountain, forest, underground.

C. A quest – usually to do with someone or something in danger and involving

- Rescue: an object or person, for example, a princess from a sea dragon; an imprisoned king;
- Recovery: For example, a golden fleece, a crystal sword, Holy Grail;
- Prevention: For example, preventing any more children being sacrificed to a monster; preventing an evil king from robbing the poor.

Make sure there is a good reason for making the journey or being in the setting. The consequences of failure so severe that the reader is aware that there is no going back, and the hero will have to face the many obstacles and dangers along the way until he reaches the end.
D. A DANGEROUS JOURNEY

The hero battles for survival:

- against the elements, such as a storm on land, sea, hurricanes, floods, fire and explosions, or hideous creatures, for example, sea monsters that block his path across the sea; a nine-headed serpent that inhabits a mountain cave; a fire-breathing lion that prevents passage through a forest.

E. SINISTER, DANGEROUS SETTING

- In faraway, exotic locations, such as desert islands; or
- A forest, cave, ruined city, castle, mountain.

Setting in a myth or legend is where:

- the action takes place;
- the object or person being sought will be found;
- the quest will be accomplished.

There may be a number of settings as the hero travels to his final destination, overcoming obstacles and evading the main villain. In a myth or legend, the hero has to overcome a number of obstacles,
which may all occur in different settings until he reaches his ultimate challenge.

**KEY POINTS:**

1. **Decide why the setting is important to the story**
   
   (a) What features are there that will help the hero?
   
   (b) What **barriers** are there to entering or escaping from the setting?
   
   (c) What **obstacles** are there to retrieving the object, person that has been hidden/stored?

2. **Think of words and phrases to help you build up the description of the setting**
   
   a) Imagine you have a camera and move it around the location, then **zoom** in to pick up extra details. Make notes of interesting settings from myths and legends you have read.

   b) Make a note of important obstacles or items that will assist or impede the hero’s victory.
3. **Be DESCRIPTIVE.**

Use figurative language such as *similes* and *metaphors*. Some chapters have ideas for similes and metaphors (S&M) included in the word section.

4. **Use SENSES to bring the setting to life for your reader.**

As well as sight, think about what your character can:

- Hear, smell, touch, taste

5. **To increase the tension, create a storm.**

Storms add atmosphere and danger to the story, can be used to indicate a supernatural or divine presence and are useful to introduce other senses in addition to sight to add tension, such as sounds, touch and smells. **For example:**

As he touched the handle of the hammer, he felt the metal grow warm in his hand and lightning sparked along its length. Above him, a hole opened in the clouds - a swirling vortex of black and silver and an immense dazzling, guillotine blade of lightning streaked across the sky and flooded the land. Around him, the wind whirled up in strange clouds, flurrying and swirling, until it
had grown to a thing of force and fury, crashing and howling, darkening the air with billowing clouds of dust.

- Add detail and description to paint a picture in the reader’s mind. Giving a setting an atmosphere is more than stating that, *It was dark.* Adding more descriptive detail could give you:

  The whole world suddenly seemed unnaturally dark, as if it had been drained of all light before the onset of a terrible storm. She looked up to see a gigantic bank of dark cloud that hadn’t been there moments before.

**G. SUSPENSE:**

*Chapter 1 - Hooks,* includes a number of ideas and sentences on how to create suspense and give a hint to the reader of the danger to come, or that the danger is getting closer.

a) **Entering the danger zone** - what’s lurking in the cave, at the top of the mountain, behind the shattered pillars in the ruined city?

b) **Feeling of being followed/watched**

c) **Fear of discovery in a hiding place** as footsteps/voices, hisses/growls get closer; snapping branches nearby.
d) **Use of punctuation to add suspense:**

- Include a sentence(s) that holds back essential information from the reader until its ending.
- Use colons, commas and repeated full stops to delay the revelation.

**Examples:**

Entering the cave, he stopped dead in his tracks.

She heard the shuffle of footsteps, the scrape of metal.

Silence. A shadow loomed over her. She dropped to her knees. Silhouetted in the trees was...

f) **Build a sense of tension by:**

i. Making frequent references to time (the ‘ticking clock’ effect):

- Could he make it in time?
- He searched desperately for a way out. Frantic now…time was running out.
- The next few seconds unfolded in horrifying slow motion.
- For fatal seconds, they stared, unable to think or move. And as they faltered, the jaws of the trap closed around them.
(ii) Varying the length of the words, sentences and paragraphs increases the pace and tension:

- Use short words, for example, at once, rather than, immediately

- Place several short sentences consecutively. She ducked. He lunged.

- Include one or two-word sentences. For example: ‘Oh no!’ or ‘Coming closer. Too close.’

- When the action is the fastest use partial sentences, eg. He had to get to his sword. Had to reach the ledge. He staggered, stumbled, scrambled. Five paces more. He lunged.

- Use short paragraphs – some may be a single line.

- Include lots of verbs to convey action and create a fast pace. Use several verbs in a sentence.
H. OBSTACLES:

Examples of obstacles the hero might have to face are:

- Ground (muddy, icy, uneven)
- Impenetrable forests, swamps, bogs
- Sheer mountains, flooded caves, labyrinth of tunnels
- Menacing, hideous creatures
- Injuries sustained on the journey or inflicted by the villain

I. EMOTION:

Show how the hero reacts (emotion) to events, setting, villain, challenges etc. The basic rule is the same as any other genre - ‘SHOW NOT TELL.’

(a) Reaction:

Describing how a character reacts to events in the setting brings the scene to life for the reader and enables them to empathise with the character’s situation and to root for the hero. For example: ‘He was terrified as he heard her demonic cackle ... she had returned.'
This *tells* the reader that the character is *terrified* but does not *show* how the character *reacts* to the situation.

Instead describe:

- How he is feeling inside using, for example, heart or pulse;
- Facial expressions
- Eyes
- Voice

**For example:** The same situation could be expanded to describe the character’s reaction to the demonic cackle.

An explosion of adrenaline surged through his body as he heard the demonic cackle...she had returned. He searched the shadows between the trees. Scrambling to his feet, he began to move. He glanced back and froze. She was right behind him.

The next few seconds unfolded in horrifying slow motion, as her black cloak spread, wings sprouted from her shoulders and her nose stretched into a sharp beak. Flapping her wings, she flew into the trees and circled above his head, transformed into a raven.
NOTE:

The hero will experience many emotions during his adventure, but for the purposes of this book, the reactions for each section have been limited to mainly fear, anger and determination, as these are the common emotions that you would expect the hero to feel whilst he is overcoming his challenges and completing his quest.

(b) Interaction:

To add a cinematic quality to your writing, it is essential that the action scenes include a description of the character’s movements as they react to the events, to the villain, and move through the setting.

The character may:

- be frozen to the spot
- move nervously, cautiously, furtively
- duck behind a tree
- move quickly – jump, spin, leap, whirl, dash, sprint
- frantically look for a way of escape
- move forward to defend himself.
Apart from enabling the reader to visualise the character’s movements, their interaction is a signpost to the reader of the degree of danger and the closeness of the threat.

**For example:**

She crouched on the ground. She was terrified of raising her head.

She darted and dodged around the pillars. Blundering and slipping on the gravel and stones, she ran for the wall, pushed off the ground, lunged for the ledge and frantically scrabbled for a grip to pull herself up. She had almost hauled herself over the top when her foot slipped and stones cascaded beneath her feet.