When Lights Fail

Study how a narrator builds tension, movement, and resolution.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3 "Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline sensory details that build tension, circle words or phrases that show the order of events, and number the major events in the order they happen to track how the narrative moves from problem to resolution.

The Backup Switch

1 At 6:12 on Friday evening, I was alone in the school auditorium, taping a loose cable beside the sound board. Outside, rain rattled the high windows, but the spring concert was still an hour away. Then the lights blinked twice and died. In the sudden dark, the audience doors groaned open as wind pushed against them. My phone flashlight showed water sliding under the backstage exit. I remembered the director's warning: the old storage room held the backup battery for the emergency lights. I grabbed the ring of keys and ran toward the wings without stopping.

2 The storage-room lock stuck, and for three long seconds I twisted the wrong key. Behind me, a violin case toppled with a hollow thud. I forced myself to breathe, chose the brass key, and felt the latch give. Inside, dust floated through my narrow beam. The battery cabinet stood beneath a shelf of paint cans, its switch covered by a red plastic guard. I lifted the guard, but nothing happened. A label beside the switch read "RESET FIRST." My hands shook as I found the small button, pressed it, and counted. One, two, three. The hallway lights flashed on, pale but steady.

3 With the emergency lights glowing, I hurried back to the auditorium. The director met me at the curtain, her face tense until she saw the lighted hall. "Can we start?" she asked. I looked through the doorway. Families waited in damp coats, and students clutched instruments against their chests. The storm still drummed above us, yet the room was safe and bright enough to see. I nodded. As the first trumpet note rose, I stood beside the sound board, listening to the rain fade beneath the music. For the first time that night, I let myself smile.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How does the first paragraph establish the narrator's situation before the problem begins? Use two details from the paragraph.

2. Identify two sensory details from paragraph 2. How do they help create tension?

3. What happens after the narrator lifts the red guard but before the hallway lights turn on? Explain how this delay affects the pacing.

4. How does the final paragraph resolve the main problem and show a change in the narrator?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 150 to 180 word narrative about a small event that suddenly goes wrong during a school activity. Begin in the action, use at least three time-order words, include three sensory details, and end with a reflection that shows how the narrator feels changed.

ANSWER KEY

When Lights Fail

HIGH SCHOOL · W.9-10.3

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline sensory details that build tension, circle words or phrases that show the order of events, and number the major events in the order they happen to track how the narrative moves from problem to resolution. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How does the first paragraph establish the narrator's situation before the problem begins? Use two details from the paragraph.	**The narrator is alone in the school auditorium at 6:12, taping a loose cable beside the sound board before the spring concert. The problem begins when the lights blink and die.**
2	Identify two sensory details from paragraph 2. How do they help create tension?	**Examples include the lock that "stuck," the violin case falling with a "hollow thud," and dust floating through the flashlight beam. These details make the dark storage room feel uncertain and urgent.**
3	What happens after the narrator lifts the red guard but before the hallway lights turn on? Explain how this delay affects the pacing.	**Nothing happens, so the narrator reads the "RESET FIRST" label, finds the button, presses it, and counts to three. The extra steps slow the moment and build suspense.**
4	How does the final paragraph resolve the main problem and show a change in the narrator?	**The emergency lights make the auditorium safe enough for the concert to begin. The narrator shifts from urgency to relief, shown by smiling as the music starts.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

At 7:05, I was arranging cupcakes for the drama club fundraiser when the fire alarm shrieked. The sound cut through the cafeteria, and red lights flashed across the frosting. First, I carried the cash box outside, gripping it so tightly that the metal handle bit my palm. On the sidewalk, cold wind lifted the paper napkins from our table and sent them spinning toward the parking lot. Then Ms. Ortiz told us the alarm had been triggered by smoke from the kitchen toaster, not a fire. While we waited for the all-clear, my friend Lena and I chased the napkins, laughing whenever one escaped our shoes. Finally, the alarm stopped. We returned to a cafeteria that smelled faintly of burnt bread, and the cupcakes were still standing in neat rows. I had expected the fundraiser to collapse before it began. Instead, the strange interruption gave everyone a story to tell while they bought dessert.

For the writing task, look for a clear event sequence, purposeful sensory details, and an ending that reflects on the experience.