

NIGHTMARE FUEL:
HOW TO WRITE HORROR THAT
GUARANTEES SLEEPLESS NIGHTS

Module 1: Fear Warmed Up



INTRODUCTION

Welcome, dear friend, to **Nightmare Fuel: How to Write Horror that Guarantees Sleepless Nights.**

Throughout this six-module course, you're going to learn how to turn your existing author's pen into a blood-soaked weapon – one that will strike fear into the heart of any horror-loving reader (un)lucky enough to cross your path.

And those sleepless nights aren't guaranteed through frights alone... because not only will you discover the advanced tips and tricks that successful horror authors employ to generate scares, but you'll also unearth the secrets behind keeping readers hooked with every chapter – eager to turn the page instead of turning out the light, even as their senses scream at them to stop.

Where applicable, modules will include worksheets and questionnaires for you to complete. For the best experience, print these out and use them each time you're formulating a new story or brainstorming ideas – not just for the duration of this course. With time, this flexing of your macabre muscles will see you transformed into a formidable fear-maker.

While the course aims to help you generate fear and suspense with your writing, the techniques you'll learn can also be used in genre crossovers. Don't worry if you're thinking of writing a scary romance, a horror-comedy, or an action-packed adventure with just a few scary scenes. Everything you pick up here will help you handle the horror in those isolated moments. The course does go into a little depth regarding planning for a full horror novel from the outset, but you'll also come to understand tension, suspense, and terror on a scene-by-scene basis.

This course assumes that you are already a proficient fiction writer, and familiar with the standard terminology of the craft.

The fundamentals of grammar and storytelling will not be explored in great depth, for example, so if you have not yet started your journey as a writer, you may wish to set these materials aside until you feel confident enough with the basics.

But don't let that scare you – you can always complete the course now and then return to it at a later date with more experienced eyes.

With that said, let's get things warmed up in this first module... as we ponder the nature of fear and help you find some dark inspiration for your next (or first!) terrifying tale.

I.I: FEAR ITSELF

"The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown."

– H.P. Lovecraft

Before you can successfully evoke a fearful response in your reader, it helps to understand what fear *is* – why and how it affects us, and the different kinds of emotional and physical responses it can cause.

Dictionary definitions define fear as "*an unpleasant emotion caused by the threat of danger, pain, or harm.*" It is, essentially, a protection mechanism designed to help us avoid, escape from, or confront dangerous situations.

But fear occurs across a broad spectrum: it could be a quickened pulse and alert senses in response to an unknown sound in the dead of night, or paralyzing terror when trapped, face-to-face, with a vicious animal. It can be a sense of dread and insecurity from knowing you did something wrong at work, or it can be incapacitating anxiety when a social event looms.

Within this spectrum lie various intensities of fear. Dread, for example, is a low-level feeling of uncertainty – of bad things to come, or the troubling sense that *something* is wrong or out of place in what should be a perfectly normal situation. Pure fear is the "*what's out there?*" emotion – the response to something rustling in the bushes, to nearby footsteps in the dark or the sound of breathing coming from inside the closet.

Panic and terror often follow, once the perceived or expected threat is made real: the monster leaps from the shadows or the intruder is revealed... and the low throb becomes immediate,

adrenaline-pumping terror. The threat is there, it is real, and you must escape from it.

Disgust is another reaction – the visceral, gut-churning response to vivid bodily harm, grotesque mutations or simple common revulsions such as to insects or rotting carcasses.

As you can guess, things that evoke a fear response within us can be real or imagined; rational or irrational. We don't need to see a threat to become scared of it – something to which anyone who has suffered an anxiety-induced panic attack can attest.

Indeed, as a horror author you aren't *really* going to be putting your reader in harm's way... so what is it about a compelling horror story that sets the mind on edge?

Most commonly, this achievement is based on the writer successfully accessing the fearful emotions of the reader – making a connection with something (perhaps a worry, insecurity, or uncertainty) that tugs on those primal strings and causes a disturbance.

This kind of access can be hard to attain with the written word, requiring two essential keys of the author: imagery and empathy. With their imagery, the author must transport the reader into the situations described within the story – just enough to let the unwary bookworm's imagination take over. This allows the reader to visualize the people, places, and things that populate the fictional world – to figuratively step through the page without realizing it, leaving them open to the author's whims.

Empathy comes in the form of characterization and understanding. Characters come first in any truly effective horror story, which we will investigate in Module 3, but empathy is not entirely restricted to them. As mentioned before, to evoke fear, you must understand fear. The author

must be just as empathetic to the fearful plight of their characters as they expect the reader to be.

Thankfully, we've all been scared at plenty of points in our lives – but not many are willing to go to the deep, dark places from which they may dredge up sufficient authenticity in their written reflections of human fear.

Since you're here, however, it's clear that you're one of the dedicated... and so your first activity is going to involve some detailed investigation of your own horrific encounters.

Exercise:

Print three copies of the Fear Investigation Questionnaire attached to this module.

Pick three instances from your life in which you were scared, apprehensive, filled with dread, or outright terrified, and answer all questions for each in as much detail as possible.

This will help you to authentically convey the thinking processes of someone who is under fearful duress and to describe the physical sensations associated with different intensities.

IMPORTANT NOTE: If you have, sadly, suffered severely traumatic experiences, you may not wish to write about those if doing so is likely to cause you major distress. The decision is yours to make, but please be wary and trust your instincts. This is not designed to be therapeutic.

I.2: INSPIRATION FROM THE DARK

Now that you have completed your first exercise, how did it feel? Do you think your descriptions closely match your emotional and physical experience at the time?

Don't worry if you think they're a little clunky right now – you can always go back and refine them, using techniques from later in this course.

Moving on, we're going to look at how you can pull up some quick and easy inspiration for your upcoming horror story, plus develop more of that empathy we spoke about earlier in the module.

There are many ways one can find inspiration for horrific tales, the first of which is through real-life events. Spend some time combing local news outlets – online and in print – for stories that may not make the wider media. Often, within the limited scope of a newspaper column, you'll come across the perfect seed for some chilling creativity.

Naturally unnerving as they are, real-life mysteries are perfect for this, providing a setup from which you can imagine your own potential storyline and resolution. What could have happened to that disappeared person given the time and place? What could happen if they returned home, but... *different*?

If you're a monster fan, comb websites dedicated to creatures in folklore across the world. There are far more sources for some monstrous mayhem out there than your standard zombies, vampires or werewolves. The likes of China and the Philippines are teeming with creatures of myth. What if you decided to transport one of those creatures to your homeland, perhaps tied to an artifact brought home by an unwary traveler? This method is good for getting to work quickly, as the lore and rules of these creatures are already laid out for you.

When creativity seems low, and you're struggling to come up with a specific fear to target, sometimes it's best to look closer to home. Think of simple fears that we tend to share as humans: humiliation, public speaking, powerlessness, invasion of privacy, sickness, abandonment, the loss of loved ones, or even financial ruin. Surrounded by an absorbing story, these basic terrors can hit with strength unmatched by any hideous creature or rampaging maniac.

As a supplement to this module, you'll find an A to Z document of some of the most common phobias. While phobias are not subtle, they can be a useful study for inspiration. Your work doesn't necessarily need to be geared towards triggering certain phobias, but they can be an excellent jumping off point for short stories in particular.

Think about combining two or more inner fears to form the core of your tale – take ophidiophobia (the fear of snakes) and agoraphobia (the fear of open/uncontrolled spaces), for example. These could be combined to create a slick tale pitting a struggling agoraphobic against a stealthy, venomous snake within the confines of their home.

Take some time to run through the list and note any phobias that stand out to you as particularly interesting, and then move on to this module's final exercise.

Exercise:

Choose three phobias from the A to Z supplement, and complete a Fear Investigation Questionnaire for each. For a greater challenge, choose three with which you have no personal experience.

Use this to put yourself in the shoes of someone being confronted by that which they fear the most. What are the specific aspects of this thing (e.g., spiders, moths, reflections) that scare them, and how would they convey that in words? What do you think the individual's physical reaction is likely to be?