

NIGHTMARE FUEL:
HOW TO WRITE HORROR THAT
GUARANTEES SLEEPLESS NIGHTS

Module 2



INTRODUCTION

"I have never demanded of a set of characters that they do things my way. On the contrary, I want them to do things their way. In some instances, the outcome is what I visualized. In most, however, it's something I never expected. For a suspense novelist, this is a great thing. I am, after all, not just the novel's creator but its first reader. And if I'm not able to guess with any accuracy how the damned thing is going to turn out, even with my inside knowledge of coming events, I can be pretty sure of keeping the reader in a state of page-turning anxiety."

- Stephen King

Planning is always a contentious issue among authors. While some enjoy the security of having a thorough blueprint for their book before they start, others prefer to allow the events to be guided by their characters.

As you can tell from this module's introductory quote, horror legend Stephen King falls firmly in the latter camp and, honestly, there aren't many who could stand to argue with a man of such experience.

Sticking rigidly to a predefined set of circumstances and scenes can heavily restrict your creative freedom throughout the writing process, leading to an "on rails" feeling that is less than engaging for authors who enjoy the excitement of the unknown. The creative process can be rendered workmanlike – an act of assembly, rather than channelling.

That much is undeniably true.

With that in mind – and the ultimate goal of helping you to improve on your horror-driven storytelling firmly in front – we

don't recommend that you conform to any rigid plan. The greatest shocks most likely arrive when they shock even *you!*

But we do recommend that you perform a few base preparations to help you start the journey with strong footing. Here they come!

2.1 KNOW YOUR STORY

You don't need to conform to a specific plan, but you do need to know the core story. Decide early on which subgenre you're going for. Is this a creature feature? A serial killer thriller? A spine-tingling ghost story or a balls-to-the-wall splatter-fest?

Knowing this before you start will help you get off on the right foot in terms of the content of your first chapter, the atmosphere that you conjure early on, and the pacing with which your story unfolds. Each subgenre tends to come with certain expectations from their devoted audiences, so you could save yourself much frustration down the line by starting off knowing who you're aiming to please.

It also helps to know the core fears you want your story to play on. These can heavily influence the narrative, and pushing hard on a few thematic buttons is generally better than spreading your efforts too thin.

Have a good idea of where your story will start, and where it will end. You might also want to create a skeletal map of your book within a standard three act framework, marking out the basic storytelling structure. This would be the events you expect to occur at each of these touch points:

Introduction
Inciting Incident
Rising Action
Climax
Falling Action
Resolution
Denouement

Remember that we don't recommend you completely commit yourself to anything you lay down in this basic map. It's only a rough guide to help lead you – but having an idea of how your ending will come about, at least, can be the easiest way to

avoid accidentally falling into cliché or the dreaded Deus Ex Machina.

This is because you'll already know the tools or knowledge you'll need to scatter throughout the story, so that your protagonist can piece them together and become ready for the final showdown.

One of the most common complaints for any horror novel tends to be an ending that arrives abruptly or feels much too convenient. Knowing where you're headed can greatly alleviate that problem, and save you a few headaches at the editing stage.

Finally, it bears repeating: even if your initial map points in a certain direction, never be afraid to let your characters' choices take you down a different path. Be true to the will of the people within your story, not to your own expectations of them.

Unbelievable character behaviour for the sake of predetermined plot points will make readers run screaming... for all the wrong reasons!

2.2 KNOW YOUR CHARACTERS

Speaking of characters, they should have some defined identity before you set them loose within the pages of your book.

Naturally, their attitudes may change and evolve in unexpected ways as you put them through the wringer, but having a solid idea of who they are – what drives them, why they're present and what they have to offer your story – will pay huge dividends in avoided frustration once you begin the writing process.

In Module 3, we'll go into more thorough depth about getting to know the players in your story. Just be aware that starting off with a gaggle of empty shells, hoping to fill them in as you go, is often a recipe for paper thin characters that are hard to differentiate or care about.

2.3 USE PHYSICAL MAPS, NOT STORY MAPS

Though you may not wish to create, or stick to, a story map, it's a good idea to create physical maps for your major settings.

If your story takes place in a small town and your characters will be travelling from point to point, map it out. Where is the police station? Where is the town hall? Where are the main population centers located?

If the bulk of the action takes place in a farmhouse, draw the floor plan. The same stands for the likes of an industrial complex, fairground, or any kind of setting.

Why? Because it will make easier, and much more enjoyable, for you to bring your setting to convincing life. With the map in front of you, think from the perspective of your character – if they're attacked in the kitchen, are they likely to run up the stairs, or to the basement?

If a scene would demand that a character run down a hallway with a monster snapping at their heels, would it be a good idea to shorten that hallway so the sequence doesn't become a little *too* convenient if they successfully escape?

That last point raises another important factor for mapping your surroundings: time. How long would it take for your characters to travel from point A to point B by foot or by car? In the heat of pursuit, precious seconds could mean the difference between life and death – so is your earlier description of an extensive, labyrinthine structure accidentally blessing your tubby everyman with the sprinting skills of an Olympic athlete as he rushes to save a friend?

Having a map will prepare you for this kind of mistake.

Plus, knowing exactly how your environs are laid out makes it so much easier to manage your characters' movements. Rather

than digging in your head to remember how many doors down the bedroom was, you can track character movement scene by scene with pins, standees or sticky notes – knowing, at a glance, exactly where they’ll go, without breaking your creative flow.

2.4 TAKE HOLD OF TIME

Time isn't always a problem, but it's something to be aware of. Are you setting a time limit on your story? Is your protagonist racing against the clock to prevent personal or widespread devastation?

If they are, prepare yourself by planning the passage of time across the structure of your story before you begin. You'll need to ensure you remind readers that the clock is ticking – but it will feel strange if sequences appear to cover long stretches of time, yet the clock has hardly moved. Plan these notifications beforehand, or make sure you have a reminder somewhere close to your desk so you don't forget and wind up with an oddly-paced sequence of events.

A time limit is a great way to ramp up suspense. If you're using it, don't squander it by not paying enough attention to the passage of time inside the world of your story.

Alternatively, you may wish to dispense with the notion of time altogether. You could even use it as a plot point to subtly disturb the reader, as Brian Keene does in *Darkness on the Edge of Town*.

There, his narrator explains in the opening chapter that due to the all-encompassing darkness and lack of electricity in his supernaturally-besieged town, the residents can only guess at how long they've been trapped there... and how much longer civility will be sustained. This approach sets a palpably bleak tone from the outset.

2.5 FORESHADOWING

When you mention the concept of foreshadowing, many people will assume you're referring to an atmospheric technique – using overcast weather, for example, to generate a sense of impending doom. As you may know, this is incorrect.

Foreshadowing involves the planting of subtle clues throughout your story that hint at what is to come. Something that is presented early on – usually fairly innocuously – is later revealed to be of great importance to the plot or in some way influential in a scene.

Given the importance of knowing where to place your foreshadowing elements and, later, where to have them pay off, it's a good idea to lay them out ahead of time as part of your basic story map.

Let's say your characters are attending a party on an island and in order to isolate them from any help, you're going to introduce a raging tropical storm. This could be foreshadowed during their trip by multiple things:

- A character drawing attention to ominous skies
- Flocks of birds leaving the area
- A snippet of overheard radio conversation with a boat captain
- A cryptic conversation before leaving the mainland, where a side character quizzes the group on their trip, assuming (incorrectly) that they're aware of the coming storm and therefore not mentioning it directly

These are all examples of foreshadowing that benefits the core plot – subtle clues that may not be entirely understood on a first read, but make sense with prior knowledge and have major relevance to future events.

Foreshadowing can also be used to create suspenseful twists, such as an apparent stalker whose movements have been noted previously in the story suddenly making their move – only to reveal themselves to be an ally.

Though foreshadowing should, generally, be reserved for major plot points, in horror it can also be beneficial to use it (albeit sparingly) to add a little pep to your scare scenes.

How could you do that? Think of scenarios where something you've earlier drawn attention to could be used to heighten the suspense in a given scene. A tech-head character, for example, could make a point early on of his pride at being one of the first adopters of a brand new smart phone. At the time, this feels like little more than a character-building quirk...

But later on, as he cowers in a closet while attempting to hide from your demented killer... the phone starts ringing! An element of humor could be inserted here, revealing that as a "valued customer" the company is calling him to ask if he is happy with the product – and the stunned service rep on the other end of the line struggles to remain on-script even as our tech-loving friend is butchered over live audio.

Implemented correctly, foreshadowing can be immensely satisfying for you as an author, and for your readers – offering up surprises, suspense, and rewarding moments.

Try to restrict the frequency with which you use it, though. A couple of major foreshadowed elements, plus one or two minor for use in specific horrific scenes, is usually enough.

If you plan these ahead of time, you should have no problems with knowing where they're going to show up, and with leaving sufficient space between your initial mention and the eventual payoff – just enough for the reader to let the foreshadowed element fall to the back of their mind, but not forget about it entirely.

Sometimes, during the editing stage, you might come across events in your storyline that feel implausible, coming right out of left field – though it didn't feel that way when you were writing it. Rather than scrapping the whole sequence, why not see if there's a way you can bring it back to relevance by adding a small element of foreshadowing to an earlier chapter?