

NIGHTMARE FUEL:
HOW TO WRITE HORROR THAT
GUARANTEES SLEEPLESS NIGHTS

Module 4



INTRODUCTION

"Atmosphere, not action, is the great desideratum of weird fiction. Indeed, all that a wonder story can ever be is a vivid picture of a certain type of human mood."

- H. P. Lovecraft

In this module, we're going to talk about a range of stylistic elements of fiction it would be beneficial to focus on when writing for horrific effect.

Some are simple techniques that are confined to a specific chapter or scene. Others are major choices that frame the entire perspective of your story.

Others, still, are elements that you thread throughout your entire manuscript – feeding what comes before, and what will come after, with the hair-raising dread and suspense your reader craves.

The quote you see above, courtesy of H.P. Lovecraft, remains a favorite for its terminology. Note how he refers to tales of the fantastic and weird: *wonder stories*.

That's an excellent way to look at horror: wonder. A terrible wonder, yet wonder nonetheless. Both the reader and protagonist are forced to stare down the impossible – to deal with the shock and awe of things, people, and situations that should not be.

That, in the characters' previous worldview, *could* not be.

And yet here they are.

To reach across the barriers of your reader's imagination and allow them to accept their transfer into this new, wondrous

world, it isn't enough to just know your story and know your characters (as you've taken care of so far in this course).

You're going to need to present it all in the right style. So let's do it!

4.1 POINT OF VIEW

For simplicity, and so you can produce the most accessible kind of horror story following your studies in this course, we'd recommend choosing from two types of POV (Point of View):

First Person and Third Person (Limited or Omniscient).

In the first person perspective, the reader is placed more directly in the shoes of the protagonist. This is led by narration in the form of "I did this" and "I did that" – the actions being surrounded by the inner thoughts and feelings of the character who is, essentially, relaying the story to the reader.

It's for this reason that most would recommend you don't pursue first person point of view for a story in which the protagonist dies. How, after all, could they be telling it if they're dead? There are clever ways around this – for example the revelation that the storyteller is a demonic entity, a ghoul, a hell-bound soul, etc., but you'll want to deploy the twist as close to the end of the story as you possibly can. Using first person present tense is also possible, but extremely challenging when it comes to developing suspense.

First person perspective is an excellent choice for intimate horror that sports a sole protagonist, for example, a chilling haunted house story or a disturbing serial killer character study. If you need to step out of your main character's head often, however, you're going to start running into trouble with comprehension and end up making a whole lot of work for yourself.

Repeatedly hopping back and forth behind the eyes of assorted characters can be a chore for readers, and switching your POV also tends to lift them right out of the story for a moment. There's a definite cognitive break each time the camera pulls back, so to speak, and so it's best avoided.

If you wish to try out a completely first-person narrative with multiple characters and personalities, a clever way to do so is to try framing your story as a series of letters, reports, emails, or journal entries which – while written by different people – all come together to deliver the account.

Moving to the most common choice in the genre, third person, you have the option between third person limited and third person omniscient. From the limited point of view, the reader is fed information solely based on the knowledge and observations of one person, usually the protagonist. The thoughts and feelings of other characters must, therefore, be relayed through their reactions to events – in dialogue, body language, and behavior.

This choice of perspective keeps the reader closely tied to the main character, but without the total immersion of a first-person narrative. See this example:

"Frank planted himself on the seat opposite Laura. He could tell from the unimpressed look on her face that she was mad about something; it was a look he knew all too well. What he didn't know was what he'd done this time to end up back on her bad side."

In this case, we would need to learn the details of Frank's blunder from what Laura says to him. Just like Frank, the reader can't know the details of what's going on in Laura's head until she shares them.

With third person omniscient, the narrator exists outside of the events portrayed on the page. As an unanchored observer, they may relay the actions, speech, thoughts, and feelings of any character as freely as they wish. Their description of the story is also not restricted to chronological order – as an omniscient being, they may even reflect on events still to come.

Some may argue that in the omniscient point of view the narrator is an objective entity, but this is not strictly true. It is possible, usually to comedic effect (though possibly as a way of building dread), for the narrator or the author to offer their opinion in the proceedings, for example:

"A moment later, Aaron did something profoundly idiotic: he put his arm inside the beast's mouth."

There, the narrator sees fit to pass judgment on Aaron's actions. To demonstrate the lifting of chronological chains, here's another version:

"A moment later, Aaron executed a profoundly stupid move that only days later would take the top spot on news outlets across the globe: he put his arm in the beast's mouth."

Depending on your story, there's a chance that both of these third-person points of view will suit. If you wish to break off occasionally to offer us your monster's perspective as it stalks its prey, you'll want to go omniscient. The same would be advisable if you have a large cast of characters, all set to meet their demises independently and out of sight of one another.

If you want us to grow close to a single protagonist and take every shock, every revelation, and every nasty hit right along with them, limited may be the one for you.

The choice is, ultimately, yours – but while you develop your skills in the genre, it's a good idea to think that the wider you cast your net, the wider you need your perspective to be.

4.2 MANAGING TENSION

Horror readers tend to look for thrills, chills and kills – that much is true. But to give them a completely satisfying experience, you need to manage how your story is constructed regarding build-up and release.

We'll go into more detail on this on a scene-by-scene basis in Module 5, but a rule to keep in mind as you write your story is that variety is necessary. You can't go full throttle all the time, despite the "*relentlessly intense!*" accolade often applied to well-regarded horror novels.

Why is this? First, readers will get burnt out if everything moves at a constantly breathless pace. They aren't guided by the ebb and flow of your words in that circumstance. They aren't subtly convinced that maybe the next chapter will offer answers to the uncomfortable notion you've planted in their brain – a driving force that makes them read on for a while before they turn out the light.

Even novels praised as *relentless* have their quiet moments. They aren't Michael Bay action showreels.

Second: keeping your pacing and deployment of scares turned up to the max throughout your novel also robs you of the ability to generate truly effective moments of suspense. It's like walking around telling the punch lines to jokes but never offering the build-up.

Most of the time, it's going to fall flat.

If your chase sequence is to be honestly frightening, it must be the explosive end to a quieter chapter (or series of chapters). Horror is as much about the build as it is the delivery, and when you mostly build *before* you deliver the scare in your scenes, you gain the power to shock the reader with those moments where you go straight for the kill.

If it's all delivery, delivery, delivery, the shocking nature of your work will quickly grow tired. The result is desensitization and dissatisfaction.

4.3 ESCALATION

Back in Module 3, we talked about stakes, and how they relate directly to your characters.

But there's something else that should escalate alongside the stakes; something that's frequently overlooked and can leave your story feeling a little less satisfying than it should have been.

That *something else* is an escalation in the direct threat that the reader feels every time good and evil meet head-on.

Just like there should be variety in your pacing so that you can build up to individual frights, each confrontation between your protagonist and your villain should become progressively more deadly in parallel with the stakes.

Start at a low throb, with inquisitive but edgy encounters. As the danger climbs and events escalate, so too should the brutality and viciousness of your clashes. This isn't necessarily to say that you require graphic violence – the attacks could be psychological, emotionally torturous, but the point is that things appear to be getting closer and closer to an inescapable boiling point every time the villain butts heads with your hero.

This is another method of building suspense. As the reader recognizes that every fight is taking a greater toll on the hero, they begin to wonder whether the climax is something their new friend will be able to survive.

This point is an easy one to forget once you're lost in the throes of writing your draft, so it's worth pinning near your desk so you can remember to up the ante every time your major players come together.

4.4 SENSORY SHOCKS

To get right under your reader's skin, and into their head, never fail to describe your scenes through sensory input. Describe how rain feels on the skin; the kinds of sounds (or lack thereof) that permeate a certain setting; how things feel in your character's hands; the temperature; ambient smells; the taste of blood, and the jolting sting of pain.

The senses are how we experience the world, and it's how you should bring yours to life on the page. The reader needs to settle into the skin of your characters and to do that they need to experience familiar sensations.

Sensory input can be used just about anywhere – whether you're describing the blinding agony of a shattered knee or the simple scents of fragranced candles that dance in the nose upon entering a room.

As with most things in writing, don't overdo it. Try to stick to a maximum of three senses, or you risk over-describing and weighing your prose down with too much information. For most applications outside of initial scene-setting, you'll only need one or two senses to achieve the effect you require. The sound and smell of sizzling human flesh do the job – unless you're really pushing for a gut-churner, there's little need to add sight and taste.

Going for sensory input is also a quick solution to the classic writer's dilemma of showing vs. telling. One of the oldest rules (though not entirely strict), is that to fully immerse your reader in the story and the characters, you should show when something is happening rather than outright tell it.

For example, writing "*I was terrified*" is a case of telling. Okay, it's a recognizable state of mind, but declaring it outright is hardly absorbing; there's nothing there for the reader to experience. Switch this to sensory, and you could have

something close to: *"My fingers trembled against the cold of the handle as I held the door shut. Beneath me, my legs threatened to buckle. The sound of my heartbeat pounded in my head almost loud enough to drown out the thudding steps of whoever – whatever – it was that prowled the hallway outside."*

There are times when, for pacing or quick movement of narrative, some telling is necessary – but those times are definitely **not** when you're trying to make your reader feel afraid!

4.5 MOOD AND ATMOSPHERE

Building mood and atmosphere in your story is closely related to sensory input. How things look, feel, smell and sound are especially important. Through drawing metaphors and parallels, it's possible to frame even seemingly intangible things (such as a feeling in the air) as signs of safety, portents of doom, or signals of outright aggression. It all depends on your choice of language.

Consider the atmospheric difference between "*The wind howled and battered on the shutters*" and "*The wind whispered as it slid through the gaps in the shutters.*"

One is certainly more aggressive than the other, offering a heightened sense of danger to the setting. Depending on the context, the second example could provide a more low-key feeling of unease than the first.

This kind of wordplay can be used just about anywhere you want to influence the mood directly. Anything from the scent of cologne to the flicker of firelight can be described with pleasant or unsettling language to generate the effect you desire. Here's another example for contrast:

"Above the fire, shadows flickered and danced in celebration of warmth."

"Above the fire, shadows roiled as they flickered in and out of existence."

Briefly drawing attention to apparently minor, insignificant details is also a great way to sow seeds of doubt and foreboding in the reader's mind. A rotting window frame, a decaying wild rabbit, a rusted manacle hanging from a wall – all could appear to be very small details in the wider description of the setting, but by their nature will automatically

put the reader on edge. Don't focus on them too long... just put them out there and let them linger.

Be sure to show how your protagonist feels in these surroundings, physically and emotionally, to guide the reader's experience. It may, in fact, be the character's current mental state that you're reflecting when you choose to describe something pleasant in a manner that sounds harsh. Remember that people also contribute to atmosphere – a beautiful day out can turn fraught with tension by the appearance of a character who causes unease in others – but, as before, be wary of including too much detail or you may find your pacing suffers as a result.

Also, beware of the cliché curse of pathetic fallacy. The hero emerging from a storm-struck night of terror into the cleansing light of a beautiful new dawn while birds chirp in the trees is probably more vomit-inducing than even the worst kind of gory splatter!

4.6 LET'S GET GORY

Earlier, we talked about tension fatigue. The same effect tends to be true for gore and splatter.

Space out your more graphically violent scenes to avoid desensitizing the reader, and when things do get gory, try to keep your description short but impactful – nobody needs a full five paragraphs describing intestines flopping out of someone's midriff.

Gore and violence have their place, and they're an authentic method of delivering shock, upset, and anxiety to your reader – bodily harm is a genuine source of fear – but going overboard is likely to lessen your impact the longer you sustain the grue. Gore, when dished up too often and with too wild an approach, can quickly become cheesy.

There *is* an exception to this, and it's entirely dependent on your audience. If you're writing within more gore-laden subgenres such as Splatterpunk or the Extreme Horror movement, chances are your readers are prepped and ready for some heavy stuff. Give them what they want if that's what they've signed up for. Anything else just wouldn't make sense!

We would stress, though, that if you're going to go to the lengths of describing graphic gore, then hold onto your barf bag and do your research. Know human anatomy. Know how damage to certain parts of the body tends to play out; know where you're likely to get arterial spray, and where things won't be quite so messy. Find out how long it would take to pass out from blood loss after losing a hand if shock doesn't get you first.

Authenticity is always key. It's going to seem very silly if someone gets stabbed in the gut and their heart falls out, isn't it?

Even if you don't plan to get particularly extreme, pay close attention and track the injuries your hero sustains. It's unlikely they're superhuman, so don't put them through walls, windows, repeated head injuries, shattered teeth, busted kneecaps and all sorts of damage, yet still have them running to save others at the end. Readers just aren't going to buy it.

4.7 IMPACTFUL PROSE

The following stylistic tips aren't restricted solely to the horror genre. They are, in fact, general demands of engaging fiction.

First of all, avoid using the passive voice in your writing. This is something that even experienced authors struggle with in some of their passages and only manage to catch at the editing stage.

Simply put, in the active voice, the subject of the sentence takes action:

"The wheel crushed the beast's head."

In passive voice, the object has action taken upon it:

"The beast's head was crushed by the wheel."

Considering you want readers to feel involved in the action in your stories, maintaining active voice is crucial. It's immediate; it's happening now, people are doing things. There's energy there, movement and dynamics.

With passive voice, everything feels sedate; used up and lifeless.

Next up, as you discovered earlier in this module, an abundance of descriptive prose will weigh your story down like a pair of lead boots. Keep your descriptive passages only as long as they need to be. Sure, sometimes it can be tough when you come up with a great metaphor or sparkling observation, but there's little worse than wading through a book packed with flowery description that serves no purpose other than to make the author feel proud.

People know what a lily looks like; just let us know it's there and let our imaginations fill in the gaps. Readers demand a level of agency in bringing your story to life in their minds – and if you attempt to take that away from them by describing

every little detail of every single thing, you block them from ever becoming fully absorbed in your work. Don't do it.

Adverbs are up next – those pesky *-ly* words that so many writers love using to describe *how* someone or something is taking action.

An abundance of adverbs is a sign of exceptionally weak writing. Stephen King once wrote "*The road to hell is paved with adverbs,*" and he could not be more correct. If you're forced to use an adverb to modify a word so it becomes closer to your intended meaning, you should find and use the word that matches your meaning instead. Simple!

Equally off-putting is when adverbs are paired with dialogue, for example:

"How would you know?" he snarled, angrily.

For dialogue, stick with using only the word *said* as a tag in the vast majority of instances. When a conversation between two people is easily followed in a back-and-forth, you can often omit the dialogue tag completely. Here's an example:

"Where did it go?" Joey asked.

"I—I don't know," Roger said. "Should we go take a look?"

"What do you think?"

"I think we'd better go back inside."

"Good idea."

This doesn't mean that you can't use a different tag on occasion, but try not to make it a habit. In the first example, you could indeed use *snarled* – just get rid of the adverb. The mood and meaning of your characters can be displayed in a much more engaging manner through the dialogue itself or their physical behavior. Remember: show, don't tell.

Redundancies are another problem to look out for, but it's likely you may not realize you've introduced any until you hit

your first editing run. Redundant words are those that offer information the reader already has, or can already be inferred elsewhere in the sentence.

A very simple redundancy would be "*in actual fact.*" Facts are real, yes. We don't need the *actual*. Another would be "*an unexpected surprise.*" Surprises are, by definition, unexpected.

It's easy for redundancies to creep their way into your prose, so keep an eye out. The leaner you can make your writing, the more enjoyable it is to read – though not all redundancies necessarily need to be removed. They may be figures of natural speech that are part of your narrator's rhythm.

Finally, be on your guard for repetition. To demonstrate how monstrous this can become, here's a quote from British satirical TV show *Garth Marenghi's Darkplace*, which lampoons pulp horror writing as the (fictional) titular author reads from his novel, *Slicer*:

"Something was pouring from his mouth. He examined his sleeve. Blood?! Blood. Crimson, copper-smelling blood, his blood. Blood. Blood. Blood. And bits of sick."

That's a hyperbolic example for comedic purposes, but you can easily see the point: repetition can make your writing hilariously bad. Repetition can appear in the form of word repetition and rhythm repetition, both of which you can see in that quote, and also as metaphor repetition.

Word repetition, as you would expect, involves using the same word multiple times in close proximity. It will start to stand out to the reader, pulling them out of their imagination and directing their focus onto the words on the page. That is not a good thing!

Rhythm repetition happens when too many sentences of similar length are placed together, causing sluggish or breathless pacing. This is fine in short bursts, and when it's the effect you

intend to have, but accidentally stick a bunch of very similar length sentences together, and you'll very quickly lull your reader right out of the experience.

Owing to lack of variation, the words become almost hypnotic. Active reading becomes passive as the unconscious brain takes over the processing of this repetitive task, and your reader's active mind starts to think about what they're going to have for breakfast tomorrow. By the time they snap back to your story, they could be multiple paragraphs ahead – having processed none of it. That's a very quick way for a reader to get turned off by your work.

That's it for Module 4: Horror with Style. Before moving to the next module, try out what you've learned here by completing the exercise. Once you're happy with your output, we'll see you in Module 5: Writing Skin-Crawling Scenes.

Exercise:

Practice your descriptive writing today, especially regarding setting, mood, and atmosphere.

Pick five different settings, drawing together a person and a place, and describe them with different emotional slants. For example:

"Sunlight flowed through the window and poured across the floor."

Vs.

"Sunlight burst through the window and fragmented, spreading its shattered rays across the floor."

Both of these imbue the scene with a very different attitude, which may, in fact, be the attitude of your narrator – the point of view is entirely up to you.

If you'd like to try your hand at more than five descriptive passages, by all means, do so. Once you're happy that you're getting a grip on switching up the mood of a scene through description – without going overboard – move ahead to Module 5.