

NIGHTMARE FUEL:
HOW TO WRITE HORROR THAT
GUARANTEES SLEEPLESS NIGHTS

Module 5: Writing Nerve-Shredding
Scenes



INTRODUCTION

"If any of [my stories] succeed in causing their readers to feel pleasantly uncomfortable when walking along a solitary road at nightfall, or sitting over a dying fire in the small hours, my purpose in writing them will have been attained."

- M.R. James

Now that we've been through the wider core elements of crafting effective horror stories, it's time to take what we've learned and apply it on the smaller scale: to individual scenes.

In this module, you're going to walk through the anatomy of a frightening scene. It's unlikely that every single one of your scary scenes will contain all of these points, and whether or not you include them all is entirely up to you.

The goal for a frightening scene is, ultimately, to move in, set up, wind up the tension, unleash the horror, and then resolve the scene while encouraging the reader to keep turning pages.

Here's what you should include.

5.1 SETUP

The beginning of your scene is dedicated to the setup or maintenance of dramatic tension. This means conflict – and for conflict, we need to have opposing forces with contradictory goals.

To start, briefly lay out the character goals for the scene. What are the people involved in the scene seeking to achieve? Why are they in this location? If the answers to these questions aren't **in any way** important to your main plot, you should think about whether or not this scene is of any use at all. Frivolous activity has no place in your story – that's the definition of filler, so either make it matter or cut it out.

If the answers **are** relevant, that's great. Let us know them as quickly as possible.

Opening with a character in search of his son, for example, could include his arrival at a decrepit and supposedly abandoned house within which he believes the child is being held. Through his internal dialogue and thoughts, plus his frantic, agitated behavior, we can quickly learn what his goal is and why he is here. There's no need to be entirely on-the-nose with your setup; in fact, as you know, it's better if you deliver the relevant details through character work than with naked exposition.

If we're joining a character that we previously left in the same situation – hiding in a bathroom, for example – this setup will be completed much more quickly. All we need in this kind of instance are a couple of sentences that hearken back to where the last scene involving this character left off. We already know what's happening here, so we don't need any elaborate introductions.

The goal, in this instance, could be made known by the character wondering if their assailant has left the area – whether or not it is now safe to flee.

An example of an extended sequence that bounces between multiple, high-tension scenes is the signature siege set piece in Jack Ketchum's controversial *Off Season*. Trapped inside their holiday cabin by an extended family of bloodthirsty cannibals, a group of friends is being forced to prepare for a savage battle. There's been mention of a gun, but we don't know where it is. Following a short spell from the perspective of the cannibals, we return to the civilized group:

"I've looked everywhere," said Nick. "It's not here." Dan was kneeling on the floor, knocking the legs off the chairs in the kitchen. The seats would work well over the windows. He looked up at Nick and saw the fear and frustration grinding at him. That man is about to cry, he thought.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "If we know where it isn't then we know where it is. In the trunk. We'll find a way to get it out of there. Meanwhile, boil some water. All you can make."

By this point in the sequence, the tension is already near the top of the scale – we've seen what the cannibals are capable of, and the clear goal of the remaining friends is to stave off any further attacks. But the goal of finding what could be their savior, the only gun, has just been thwarted by circumstance. Worse, it's outside... right in the midst of the antagonists.

The new immediate goal is to boil water as a means of self-defense, along with barricading the windows. And so we move forward with that for now, even though we know it's a weaker option.

The odds of survival for our heroes don't look good.

5.2 LOCK THEM IN

An important part of keeping the reader rapt in your horrific scenes is to completely lock them into the moment. Restrict your narration and character thoughts and activities to **only** those things that are relevant to the present as depicted in the scene.

This means no jumping away to different characters in different places, even for a moment, before you've deployed your scare. To do so would only serve to defuse any tension you've racked up to this point.

Leaving the scene is perfectly fine if you intend to give the reader a break from the intensity. Ketchum does this multiple times during the *Off Season* siege we mentioned earlier, but each time he comes back to it for another scene, he delivers a shocking climax before breaking away once more.

As you know from earlier in this course, this is a method of preventing reader burnout. Ketchum wants to let you catch your breath, however briefly, before he takes you back in – but you can rest assured that each time the action dips back into the siege, something truly horrible is going to happen before you're permitted to leave again.

Bouncing back and forth without offering any payoff will lead to frustration in the reader. If the tension appears to be cranking, dropping, cranking, dropping, and cranking again without ever blowing the lid, annoyance won't take long to set in.

So until you've deployed a scare or confrontation, keep your perspective, and your characters' thoughts focused entirely on the current situation. Grab the reader by the throat and keep them where you need them.

5.3 PACING

In moments of terror, using short and fragmented sentences will help you push your reader into a heightened state. Use this to your advantage.

In the early stages of your scene, as you're working to build suspense, you can rely on longer, dread-building sentences and paragraphs. This is an effective method of stylistically matching your character's unease – the written equivalent of the hand slowly reaching for the doorknob in a horror movie.

This should change once you deploy the scare and your character makes the mental shift from fear into terror and panic. When fight or flight takes over, thoughts are sent racing and adrenaline surges. Make the reader feel this, by switching to shorter sentences and forcing them into a shallower, more frantic breathing pattern.

Creating this kind of experiential connection with the panic your character is going through will pull your reader deeper into the scene – and thus into the horror – whether they like it or not.

5.4 MISDIRECTION

If there's one thing that a genuinely well-crafted scare should never be, it's **predictable**. Use the art of misdirection to your advantage. Pull with the right, and punch with the left.

Horror is often structurally compared with comedy, and for a good reason: the success of both relies heavily on elements of misdirection, build-up, and release.

To send your reader figuratively rocketing off their seat with shock, hit them where they least expect it. As the tension builds in your scene, heading for the inevitable (terrifying) climax, construct the action in such a way that you're pointing your reader's attention in one direction, but come at them from somewhere different with the payoff.

Horror is based in the unexpected, and the unpredictable, and misdirection is a classic staple – think a character apprehensively investigating a scratching noise coming from a floor-level cupboard. Slowly, fearfully, they reach in... gulping as the saliva dries in their mouth... and open the cupboard door.

Inside, there's nothing... but then something skitters in the doorway to their right. They look... but also see nothing. It seems they're alone – and then they stand, look up, and the monstrosity we've been expecting is right above them, preparing to attack.

To prevent this becoming stale and overplayed, ensure your reader doesn't know when you're going to drop that final bomb – keep them wondering, keep them rapt, and keep them fearful until you know it's the right moment to strike. This takes practice, so keep at it and try a few different approaches with your scenes – it's possible to masterfully subvert expectations by deploying the shock much earlier than usual, for example.

5.5 CALLBACKS

This is a quick consideration for your scene: do you plan to make use of any callbacks to previously foreshadowed elements?

Look back to your story plan from Module 2. Did you choose to introduce any foreshadowing items that you intend to exploit for the benefit of a scare?

If you did, is this a suitable scene in which to use it?

5.6 FALSE ALARMS

Not every scare needs to be a bona fide encounter with your villain or monster. It's better if you make use of a couple of false alarms to avoid a "revolving door" feel when it comes to your antagonist's appearances.

Think the old horror cliché of the cat jumping out of nowhere, or the raccoon knocking over a trash can. The scene plays out just like any other scare, and does deliver the climax – but it's nothing for our hero to worry about.

We're sure you can think of better false alarms to introduce than the customary cat, based on the context and content of your story, but don't be afraid to use them.

If you already have a couple of scenes featuring false alarms, think about making this scene a *false* false alarm: at first appearance, it seems as though it's another fake out... but just moments later, the villain strikes.

5.7 THE WRONG MOVE

We've already discovered that human beings are flawed creatures. Sometimes we make poor decisions, clumsy movements, or get caught out by our hubris. Your characters are no different.

As you know by now, you need to strike a balance between conflict being the result of your character making the right move or the wrong move.

Now's the time to decide: is this particular scene going to wind up a frightener because your hero is pursuing the correct path – and thus comes up against resistance from your antagonist – or because they've mistakenly placed themselves in harm's way?

If the climax is a result of a mistake, you aren't forced to make the adversary in this scene be the actual villain of your story. They don't have to show up every time you want to execute a scare.

Instead, your protagonist could be investigating a line of inquiry that turns out to be completely wrong, putting them temporarily in the sights of an angry gang, a wild animal, or even the police.

5.8 KEEP THEM READING

When your scene is complete, your biggest goal is to convince the reader that they should continue turning pages. The easiest way to do this is to end the chapter with a cliffhanger – something that speaks to the main plot but also gives an allusion to, or raises a question about, what’s coming next.

A good example of this at work can be found in Tim Curran’s four-chapter prologue for *The Spawning*, wherein he ends each chapter with a reminder that danger is never far away.

Here’s a sample from the end of the first chapter:

Butler scrambled to her feet and thumbed the intercom on the wall, bringing up the station-wide channel. "If anybody’s out there, give me a holler! This is Butler! I’m in the dorm! Brighten? Van Erb? Callaway? Is anybody goddamn well out there?"

There was silence for a moment, her voice echoing through the station.

Then a peal of static from the speaker.

And a voice, a shrill and buzzing voice: "Butler," it said.

This time she did scream.

With that ending, we have far more questions than answers. Whose voice was that on the radio? Why did Butler see fit to scream when she heard it? Something mysterious seems to have happened at this station, but if Butler can’t remember what, then what prompted her to scream?

The only option is to keep reading.

Here’s a similar page-turning chapter ending from Jack Ketchum’s *Off Season*:

That man in the woods, she thought. The man in red. Nick might not make it. He might not live to follow her. She had to consider that. What then? Please, she thought, let him follow. Her fingers clutched the bars of the cage. Her knuckles went white. The thin man was staring at her from where he sat against the wall. The couple on the floor had finished with one another. How long, she wondered, before they start on us. How long do I have, how much time?

Her answer came swiftly.

Of course, as soon as we start reading the next chapter we realize the answer we held on to hear isn't to be found there. Ketchum takes this opportunity to briefly switch characters and catch up with Nick – but for the reader, it's too late to put the book down. We have to continue.

This is exemplary of another good method of keeping your reader moving for at least a few chapters: finish your scene on a cliffhanger along with a brief mention of another character who is **on their way to the scene**.

Your reader knows that the only way they're going to close the loop on what has happened in this chapter will be to read the next one and discover, along with the newly arriving character, what the outcome has been.

5.9 THE SELF-SCARE TEST

With your scary scene complete, step away and let it rest for a short while. Come back and read it in its entirety, and then ask yourself: does it affect you at all?

Can you feel the foreboding, the dread you were building? Do you get the shivers or heart-pounding horror you were hoping for?

If not, dig deeper and go harder. This is horror; don't play it safe. The fears and anxieties on those pages are coming from **you**. Although horror is often cathartic, you should be the first to feel the impact of what you've written.

Ask yourself what the cause may be and analyze the scene thoroughly. Is it down to a lack of authentic characterization? No atmosphere? Is it all too unbelievable? Perhaps it could be a simple case of over-description bogging it all down, or even a lack of description preventing immersion.

Once you can pinpoint the problem, you can likely fix it without needing to scrap the lot.

But if you've managed to make yourself break out in a cold sweat, feel the saliva in your throat dry up, or your scalp involuntarily tingles, then congratulations. You've done it!