

NIGHTMARE FUEL:
HOW TO WRITE HORROR THAT
GUARANTEES SLEEPLESS NIGHTS

Module 6: Killer Tips and Tricks



INTRODUCTION

"[Horror] shows us that the control we believe we have is purely illusory, and that every moment we teeter on chaos and oblivion."

- Clive Barker

Congratulations – you’ve survived the major bulk of **Nightmare Fuel: How to Write Horror that Guarantees Sleepless Nights.**

In this final module, we’re going to ease you across the finish line with a few shorter tips and takeaways that you can keep in mind as you forge a fierce new path through the world of horror.

You don’t always have to use them, but they’re quick and easy to deploy and can add substantial impact to your prose.

We hope you’ve found the course to be interesting, enlightening, and truly helpful, no matter how experienced you are or how much of the content you’re already familiar with. If even just one gold nugget helps take the fear factor of your stories to the next level, your confidence in your writing will soar.

As will the appreciation of your readers, who are sure to return time and again in the knowledge that you’re one author who guarantees what they crave: sleepless nights stuffed with nerve-jangling terror!

So without any more ado, let’s take it home.

6.1 DARKNESS REMAINS

The sleepless nights don't have to come to an end when your book does. To keep the horrific effect of your story alive for a little while longer, work a dark twist or flourish in at the end.

Even if your ending has already been planned, it usually isn't difficult to add a few extra paragraphs – or even just a few lines – to the finale. Something that sees the reader exit the tale on an off-kilter note.

Is your protagonist forever scarred or marked in some way by their experience – physically or psychologically?

Is the evil not dead, but merely sealed away? Does the protagonist know this?

Has your protagonist been wrong all along, and they've been fighting on the wrong side? Maybe they have... and they decide they're perfectly fine with that.

Has all that's been lost actually been *worth it*?

These kinds of dark strokes added to your ending don't need to be huge, or even integral to the story itself. They're solely about not closing off the book with everything neatly tied up and decorated with a little bow. Add just enough to satisfactorily close your open arcs (character and story), but let a bothersome sliver of doubt remain...

It's something that creeps into the back of the reader's mind, where it beds in and continues to scratch at them long after they've finished.

6.2 HUMOUR

Some people are just fine with relentlessly tense narrative experiences, but the majority will become fatigued if your story is wall-to-wall grimness, terror, and slaughter. Give them a break occasionally by adding a touch of humor to some scenes.

Depending on your style, the humor could be light-hearted or distinctly black. Whether you go with a character making a funny quip, an unexpected internal observation, or an absurd action (frustration, desperation, and confusion are solid excuses for this), is up to you.

Be careful not to overdo it, though. You're writing a horror story after all, not a comedy. The more you try this, the better you'll become at finding the right balance – and when it works, it works superbly well. Humor staves off fatigue by breaking tension, allowing a little relief for the reader before the intensity ramps up again...

But it can also be used to great effect by making the reader drop their guard, assuming that something funny happening means a serious scare isn't waiting around the corner. Unfortunately for them, there's a second punch line coming right up... but it's of the horrific kind.

6.3 GET BRUTAL

Just as you shouldn't be afraid to get funny on occasion, don't be afraid to get brutal. Treat your protagonist with utter ruthlessness. As the stakes are raised, allow them to fail, and suffer the consequences, when it comes to the mid-to-high stakes conflicts. Don't play it safe and restrict failures only to lower-stake problems.

Lead them down the path to hell – destroy all they love, all they hold dear, and everything they used to think they stood for. Strip them to the core.

In some cases, provided you're willing to switch Point of View for the remainder of the story, you might even want to kill the protagonist off if doing so feels organic.

Make them suffer.

6.4 DON'T PEAK EARLY

Starting off with a bang is a universal rule of writing a novel. The first chapter is crucial to planting the hook firmly in your reader's mind – but be wary.

It can be very tempting to load all your best efforts into an opening salvo. After all, if the reader is thoroughly terrified after just a few pages, surely you're going to have their horror-loving heart for the remainder?

Unfortunately, that isn't true. Start scary – but get *scarier*. The last thing you want is diminishing returns as your story progresses, never reaching the heights of its early shocks.

If you read through your first draft and feel that the opening may be too strong compared to what comes later, it means you've done an excellent job of *constructing* that initial scare. Why is that? Well, since readers aren't familiar with your characters by this point, they aren't emotionally invested enough for the fright to be rendered effective by character work or storyline. It's more likely to be your masterful composition that makes it what it is.

(And well done for that!)

A good solution is to try taking the concept (setup and composition) of that first scare and swapping it to a different position later down the line. It's sure to fit in somewhere, with minor tweaks, just as the scene you're replacing with it can surely be transposed to your opening.

6.5 REVEALING THE BEAST

Don't reveal your monster in all its glory far too soon. For the majority of your story, keep the creature under wraps.

In the early stages, hint at its presence – perhaps the characters find a claw, a tooth, or some secretion related to the monster. Give fleeting glimpses or incomplete descriptions of the beast; characters rendered dumbstruck by fear may, after all, only focus their attention on one feature as the thing closes in for the kill.

Provided your choice of POV allows, you can even enter the monster's perspective to present these kill scenes and execute them successfully without giving much away in your description.

What the monster is and what exactly it looks like is part of the central mystery. It's a core element of the suspense of a creature feature. Give it all away too soon, and your monster will seem less and less scary as the story goes on. Fear of the unknown – and the element of surprise – is something you very much need to maintain.

Let the details drip out at a measured pace before revealing the complete creature as part of a slam-bang, pulse-pounding encounter. For monster fans, that's a high point of the genre, especially if you've managed to develop a highly original organism for your characters to face off against.

And even when the reader thinks they've seen everything there is to see of your monster, give it one extra ability or twist that we haven't yet seen as the climax approaches. That's a sure-fire way to keep the excitement alive while you're shooting for the finish.

6.6 SUFFER THE INNOCENTS

If you want readers to despise your villain beyond any possibility of redemption, have them murder the innocent and frail. Make nobody safe. Put civilians indiscriminately in the firing line: men, women, children, the old, the meek, household pets, and more.

If the reason the villain kills a quiet old man, who poses no threat, is that witnesses cannot be allowed, we still hate them for the act despite the rationale.

6.7 PUNCH FROM BEHIND

A great tip for subconsciously increasing the impact of your sentences is to place the most dominant word – the one you want to carry the punch – to the end of the sentence.

That word, and the imagery and feel that it evokes will ring out in the reader's mind, instead of being dulled by a lesser word coming after it.

Look at this, for example:

"From the darkness, it emerged, revealed in all of its grotesque majesty; but those savage, blade-like teeth were all Lucy could focus on."

Let's switch it up to place the focal word, the primary image, "teeth" at the end.

"From the darkness, it emerged, revealed in all of its grotesque majesty; but all Lucy could focus on were those savage, blade-like teeth."

Notice how instead of instinctively flowing to the next sentence when we end with the weaker *on*, we bite harder (no pun intended) on the word *teeth*. It's harsher, more powerful. Coming last, it forces us to focus on it for a moment longer – to imagine the danger.

It isn't necessary to do this shuffle for every sentence in your book. In fact, doing so would weaken the prose due to repetition – but when you're looking to add punch to a sentence, put it at the back and it's sure to be delivered.

Evocative and physical words like *corpse*, *blood*, *bite*, *smack*, *guts*, *dead*, *rot*, *scream*, and so much more are ideal for this kind of positioning.

Making sure you do this for the final sentence in a chapter is also a great way of subtly encouraging the reader to continue

to the next. Ending with that punch is stimulating; it keeps the mind fired up with imagination, and keeps us wanting more.

6.8 TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Just like readers can become fatigued by an onslaught of terror and suspense, so can writers. As you've discovered by now, writing horror can be a darkly introspective and draining task. Don't forget to take care of yourself.

Take breaks as necessary and give your mind a rest. Panic on the page works best in short bursts and so does writing it. Try using a tool such as the Pomodoro Timer (there are multiple online versions of this you can use) to restrict the time you take carving out the roughest scenes.

Stick to it and keep yourself fresh – because if you begin to feel drained and start to phase out of the action, it's likely the words will feel harder and harder to conjure. Instead of pushing against the wall just to get the scene finished, step away and rest. Come back when your reserves are built up again, and you'll finish with power instead of a self-defeating whimper.

6.9 THANK YOU

Finally, please accept our heartfelt thanks for joining us and taking the time to complete this course. Revisit it if you need to – it's designed specifically for you to hop in when necessary and top up on tips. We hope the accompanying worksheets become a regular part of your writing routine.

Keep immersing yourself in the writings of other horror authors, and see if you can point out where they're implementing the techniques and principles you saw in this course. Improving your fortitude as a writer is equal parts reading and writing, so don't skimp on exposure to other people's work.

Now there's just one last exercise for you to complete...

Exercise:

Write! Attached to this module is a document containing 22 killer writing prompts. Dig in, choose one (or more!) and get writing! Practice everything you've learned throughout this course, and you'll be scaring the pants off readers before you know it.