

How to Write a Horror Novel: Tips for Scary Scenes

Leave your readers with a proper fright after finishing your unnerving tale.

You're writing your horror book, and everything is coming together nicely: The characters have depth and intriguing backstories; you've staked out a creepy setting; and your stalker, monster, cosmic entity, killer inanimate object, etc., is iconic and menacing. You have the components of a great story, yet can't help but feel that something is missing. You begin to question if you know how to write a horror novel, until you read your manuscript, and only then does it hit you. You don't feel... *scared*.

The Importance of a Scare in Horror Story Writing

A well-constructed scare is as important as characters, setting, and plot in horror story writing. It adds bitter flavor, lingering with your readers long after they've flipped through the pages. Every ominous shadow in the corners of any room they walk into, strange bumps and thuds in the night, everyday objects that typically don't frighten them—all because your book left a lasting impact. Tending to your scares with the love and care they deserve keeps your book faithful to the horror genre, and more importantly, makes your book memorable.

Tip #1 to Write Horror: Find Your Subgenre

Before you begin sprinkling in jump scares or passages of shock and gore, consider the subgenre of your horror book, as each has its own types of scares. A paranormal story relies more heavily on suspense and unease, whereas a slasher leans into jump scares and bloodshed to frighten the reader. If you are struggling to pinpoint your subgenre, consider the following types of horror:

- Paranormal: events, activities, and entities not scientifically explainable, e.g., ghosts or telekinesis
- Psychological: relating to the protagonist's mind
- Slasher: a killer or entity preying on a group of people
- Gore and body horror: concerned with extreme violence and visceral experience
- Monster: a creature or one's transformation into one, e.g., werewolves, vampires, zombies

[This article](#) covers a more extensive list breaking down these subgenres further, but these are the broad ones worth considering for the sake of this process.

Tip #2 to Write Horror: Harness Fears Effectively

Now that you've identified your subgenre, we can look at the different types of fear. Each stroke of horror utilizes different fears, including fear of Death, fear of the loss of sanity, fear of loss of loved people or culture, or fear of pain.

Consider two classics: *Psycho*, written by Robert Bloch, utilizes *suspense* and *sudden violence* to startle readers in small bursts, whereas *The Shining*, written by Stephen King, uses the same suspense to establish *dread* and *anxiety* that prolongs until erupting into chaos in its final pages.

These two books reveal different approaches for how to write a horror novel by relying on different types of fear to frighten their readers. It's crucial to have a solid understanding of your subgenre to know what fears work best. For example, a gore book sustaining the same suspense as *The Shining* won't be as effective as one that prioritizes shock and disgust.

It's also worth cozying up with similar books and noting their structure. A suspenseful story may involve leaving a trail of unease throughout, and thus requires a different editing approach than a book with quickly established jump scares. That's not to undermine the importance of maintaining an eerie atmosphere regardless of subgenre (which can be expertly curated utilizing mood boards), but rather to emphasize how scares are catered to differently in horror stories. A revision of your book centered on incorporating these fears can prove useful to heighten the effectiveness of your book.

Tip #3 to Write Horror: Consider POV

Lastly, and this may sound surprising, but the point-of-view you choose to write your book in greatly matters in how you approach writing scenes that genuinely feel scary.

First-Person POV

A first-person POV puts readers in the shoes of the narrator, and thus, they can only visualize the narrator's senses. Curating surprises may be more effective if it focuses on the character's sudden reaction and feelings toward a scare, told from their perspective. A psychological horror book can utilize confusion to scare readers. You can lean into what the narrator sees and feels that may be abstract or out-of-the-ordinary to play with the reader's mind, especially if the narrator themselves doesn't recognize it as peculiar.

Third-Person POV

Despite the story not unfolding through the narrator's eyes, a third-person POV can be effective in staging sudden scares or odd occurrences, while also describing the world outside of a

character's immediate view. Great for suspense, a third-person POV allows you to focus on an object or threat that is approaching a character without their knowledge. A monster lurking in the shadows or a ghost appearing on a monitor when someone looks away: A third-person POV is excellent at staging the world outside a character's direct experiences.

Even... Second-Person POV?

An excellent example of POV manipulation in horror story writing is in *The Only Good Indians*, written by Stephen Graham Jones. (Minor spoilers ahead!) The book is mainly written in the third-person, following a group of hunters tracking a monster. In one instance, a character is scanning his surroundings with a gun when he lands on someone, you, the reader, now addressed in the second-person as the monster they've been hunting. It's a masterful example of producing a scare by exploiting POV before the reader can fully comprehend what's happening.

Map Out and Curate Your Scares

Once you understand your subgenre, its associated fears, and identify your POV, you can begin to establish your scares. There is an [extensive list](#) of tips from published writers on what they utilize to startle their audience, and reading other horror books and identifying what about them scares you will inspire you to implement the same techniques when you write horror.

Scare Trope Example No. 1: Horrifying "Safe" Spaces

Consider including scares in otherwise-safe spaces. Vividly describing a derelict house or abandoned hospital can be equally valuable in building suspense and unease. Think of *Jaws* and how the novel (by Peter Benchley) and film (by Steven Spielberg) made an entire generation afraid to swim at the beach, or how the film *The Ring* (based on Japanese horror novel, *Ring*, by Koji Suzuki) recontextualized water wells and TVs as things/spaces to be afraid of.

Scare Trope Example No. 2: The Unlikely Threat

Another example of a common scare type is an unlikely threat. It could be argued that *The Omen* (screenplay by David Seltzer) or *Children of the Corn* (again by Stephen King) largely contributed to a trope in horror involving unease toward children. We assume them unlikely to be a threat, only to be confronted with how horrifying they truly are. Or, how a film like *Child's Play* or a novel like *How to Sell a Haunted House* (by Grady Hendrix) instill in viewers a lurking fear that prompts them to keep their eyes on inanimate dolls...just in case they spring to life.

Toying with the unordinary and even looking inward at what scares you personally are excellent ways to construct a memorable scare that surprises the reader. You can defy expectations or lean into what already unsettles you and people like you.

Final Thought About How to Write a Horror Novel

A horror book can have intricately written characters or a unique plot, but if it's not scary (or even suspenseful), readers will feel disappointed. Hopefully, you now feel more confident on how to write a scary scene in your horror novel or short story; hopefully you feel prepared to unnerve and surprise your readers. My final piece of advice for how to write a horror novel is to remember that it is okay to revise and edit until you feel confident your scares are effective. Horror readers love nothing more than the excitement of fear and unease creeping into their daily lives after reading an effective, frightening spine-tingler. Family, friends, colleagues, and professional beta readers can provide valuable feedback that helps you identify what didn't work and what needs a bit more to really get readers' hearts racing and keep them up at night.