

HORROR WRITING GUIDE

Writing great horror can be challenging, but it doesn't have to be. If you consider yourself a master crafts-person of true mind melting horror, this guide might not be for you, but if you are like us, sometimes a plug-and-play guide can take some of the guesswork out of writing a great session chock full of gasps.

This guide and supplement is intended to help a DM plot out great tension building fear.

CHOOSE YOUR MONSTER

Any monster can be made to suit a horror story given the proper lead up as any good scary story is all about the anticipation of the scare. Once you decide on a monster, look at it's abilities and consider how it might use them to hunt and prey on creatures.

1. ESTABLISH NORMALCY/COMFORT

In the example story, we have a simple farmer, that's it. In this case a farmer works well because he is just a regular person, not a brave adventurer, making him vulnerable. The players may meet him before their continued adventures in town. They may hear of his woes through the townfolks if they haven't met him yet. However, the introduction is made, the DM has to establish what is normal. Find a way to establish all of this column before moving on in the story.

2. ESTABLISH THREAT/UNEASE

Here is where you can start to tease that something may be wrong. The whole point to this is to invent some scenarios that could be explained away as odd, curious or circumstantial. This creates curiosity in the party.

3. SIGN POSTS/DREAD

At this stage we want to give the party clear warning signs, as the next steps to come are made even better when there were clear signs presented to run. This is a crucial step. The heroes need to be presented with irrefutable proof that horror is afoot, because they cannot be heroes without seeing the signs but persisting anyways in order to right the wrong.

In order to build tension, bounce back and forth between this stage stage 2. If solid unease and dread are established the payoff will be great.

4. IMPENDING DOOM/TERROR

This is the height of fear. The party cannot have been confronted by the monster quite yet. As soon as the monster is seen, the tension is released. This stage is the all about going over the top without the confrontation. If the monster is not resolved, this terror will spread.

Finish this stage completely before moving on to Attack/Horror.

5. ATTACK/HORROR

Now the party sees the monster! Let the players see the physical form of what they have dreaded. This is the final stage and once this has been reached. There is really no going back. The tension has been completely released. If the players fail to win the day or the monster escapes, you can start the process again, but faster. Start back at Unease but move through the stages quickly because the players will not likely gain the same feeling twice unless a new threat has emerged or the original has gotten stronger.

BUILDING YOUR HORROR STORY MATRIX

This is an example of a completed story. When completing your table, try starting from Impending Doom and determining what the worst case might be. From there, that can help you determine what the opposite state is to highlight in the Comfort phase. From there, focus on what adds the most contrast in both the Horror and Dread phases.

MATRIX OF FEAR

Stage / Feeling	Establish Normalcy / Comfort	Establish Threat / Unease	Sign Posts / Dread	Impending Doom / Terror	Attack / Horror
Psychological	The farmer has a happy routine and is well respected within his community	The farmer complains that he hasn't been sleeping well, feeling ill lately	The farmer reports that he's seeing visions of glowing eyes	The farmer is found alive but paralyzed with fear	Party member sees the hallucinations of glowing eyes
Unnatural	The birds are chirping and the farmers crops and vegetables are the best around	Odd absence of any wildlife and his vegetables look fine but taste sour	Hundreds of crows are seen around the farm just watching and waiting	The day/night cycle has stopped, it is perpetually night	The Scarecrow is a shambling dark magic fueled form
Gross Out	The farmer is older but very fit and healthy, the party interacts with healthy animals	The party discovers dead, clawed up rats, but it could be anything	The farmer or a party member vomits up any food eaten, all is spoiled	The farmer or one of his animals is found dead, killed horrifically	The Scarecrow is stuffed with rotting flesh, maggots pour out