

SCARY BUT SMART: STORY BLUEPRINT FOR ELEVATED HORROR



How to Use This Guide: Use this blueprint to develop horror stories that strike a balance between cerebral and terrifying. Whether your horror explores grief, identity, folklore, or fear of the unknown. This guide helps shape elevated concepts that still bite.

DETERMINE THE CORE FEAR OR THEME

What universal fear or emotional truth is your story exploring?

Primal Fear examples to increase the horror:

- fear of the dark
- fear of the unknown
- fear that something terrible will happen
- fear of the unseen
- fear of psychopaths
- fear of creatures
- fear of predators
- fear of pain or torture
- fear of death
- fear of being alone
- fear of going insane.

HORROR CONCEPT / PREMISE

What's the hook that makes this idea genre-worthy?

High concept examples:

- a remote village that sacrifices outsiders
- a livestream that dooms anyone who watches it
- a search team stalked by an ancient presence buried in Arctic ice.

BRAINSTORM HORROR CONVENTIONS

Horror thrives on recognizable patterns that tap into our deepest fears. Knowing the tropes of the genre doesn't mean relying on clichés; it means understanding the expectations you can subvert, twist, or amplify to deliver unforgettable scares.

- Terrorize the characters
- Isolate the characters with settings and situations
- Threaten your characters with awful, violent, and tortuous deaths.
- Monster/Villain that will inflict endless terror and violence.
- Put your characters in sinister situations that are out of their control.
- Include a moral statement

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CREATE AN EMOTIONAL ENGINE

Decide who is emotionally unraveling and why? What does your protagonist believe or deny that fuels their arc? Make this personal and primal.

Horror emotions:

- Apprehension
- Anxiety, surprise, and shock
- Fear
- Suspense
- Dread
- Anguish
- Panic
- Horror
- Hysteria

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ADD A METAPHOR LAYER

What is the horror a stand-in for? Under all of the horror you need social commentary about issues that affect our daily life.

- Violating values
- Issues like STD's
- Discrimination

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tone and subgenre blend

What kind of horror are you writing?

- Psychological
- Supernatural
- Body horror
- Folk horror
- Tech/AI horror
- Slasher
- Cosmic

create an ending that says something

How does your ending reinforce your theme?

What does your protagonist learn-or fail to learn?

Avoid convenient survival. Aim for transformation or sacrifice.