

How to Write A
GOTHIC MYSTERY

In One

(Or Maybe Two)

Painless Lessons



DORCHESTER COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
2014

Elements of Gothic Mysteries

Words Found on Book Jackets

Haunting, chilling, terror, darkness, evil forces, sinister, violence, shadows, mystery, suspense, romance, horror, adventure, love

The Building

The building in most gothics is so important that it almost becomes a character in the story. The term "gothic" comes from a style of architecture used in the Middle Ages.

Words associated with the building might be:

Gargoyles, arches, turrets, towering arches, stained-glass windows, lancet windows, tomb, haunted, creaking, gloomy, nunnery, monastery, castle, Southern plantation

The Heroine

The heroine can be either meek and helpless or independent and courageous. She can be in any kind of work, a teacher or any other kind of professional, a social worker, a stay-at-home mom, or anything else. She can be any of the following:

Caught in a web of terror, poor, alone in the world, helpless, pretty (or not so pretty), saved from the terror of the plot by a strong, noble man or by her own intelligence and courage.

The Hero

Before the 1800s, gothics had a hero and a villain. After that, the qualities of good and evil became blended into one character, the hero-villain, who usually turns out to be good in the end.

Handsome, dark, sinister, mysterious, contradictory, dashing, tall, slender, suave

Dark Forces

The supernatural plays a part in many gothics. Nature behaves unnaturally. Paintings, statues, or suits of armor come to life. All seemingly supernatural elements are explained at the end of the story. Some vocabulary associated with dark forces:

Graveyards, dark forests, red clouds, purple skies, evil powers, magic rings or other magic items, earthquakes, charms, spells and curses, nightmares, mysterious sounds, greed, mysterious deaths

The Secret

Gothic plots usually hinge on an unrevealed secret, perhaps with an old family mystery or a mysterious building. It is the heroine who unravels the secret before she becomes a victim.

Mysterious objects, strange behavior, strange disappearances, unusual noises, strange or threatening animals, strange comings and goings, eerie, sinister laughter

Other Possible Ingredients

A scarred face reflecting a scarred soul, a decaying house representing a decaying personality; an animal representing a human quality, a madman or madwoman

The Ending

There is no single ending for a gothic. However, here are some traditional outcomes:

Heroine learns the secret of why she was where she was, good triumphs over evil, wrongs are righted, bad people are punished, mysteries are understood and explained, the hero and heroine get together, sickness is healed, spells and curses are removed or broken, terrible but necessary things happen in order to restore peace

Building a Gothic

A Do-It-Yourself Guide to Writing a Mystery Short Story

Step One:

Begin your story by using the sentence below as your opening sentence. You can change the name of the mansion if you wish.

The forbidding gray mansion known as High Towers stood alone on a hilltop, lost among the shadows of skeleton trees.

After you have written the above sentence on your paper, **brainstorm at least 25 descriptive words and phrases** that portray the setting. Then develop your first paragraph. **Show** the reader the house, the weather, the night, the atmosphere, the surroundings, the sky, etc. In other words, use the beginning paragraph to **create a mood**. Use **similes and metaphors** throughout your story.

Step Two

Using a good, logical transition, begin the second paragraph with this sentence:

Lovely Amelia Thornton, alone in the world, arrived at High Towers late one night.

In this part, describe Amelia (or whatever you decide to call her) and what part she plays in the story. For example, let the reader know how she actually got to High Towers (car, on foot, etc.), why she is alone in the world, what (if anything) she has with her, why she is there, how she is acting as she arrives at the house, etc. The above information does not need to be presented in the order given here, but it should be included somehow. Before you begin to write, **brainstorm ideas and possibilities**. Use your imagination but also remember what the qualities of a gothic heroine are. **Use action verbs as you begin to weave the plot**.

Step Three

Begin the next part with the following sentence:

Just as she put her finger to the bell, the massive oak door swung open, and there stood Sir Colin Sweetwater.

In this part, describe Sir Colin (or whatever name you give him). How does he look? What does he say? What is wearing? How does he sound? Also include how Amelia reacts, what she says, what happens right after he opens the door. This is a good place to introduce **dialogue**. If you are not sure how to punctuate dialogue, look up the rules in your book. Remember to use **action verbs**. Here you continue to **develop the plot and build suspense**.

Note: As you proceed to Step Four, keep in mind what you've already written and make sure you are being consistent. If you need to change anything for your story to make sense, **do so**. This is also a good time to see whether you have been consistent in your use of **tense**. Your whole story should be written in the **past tense**. Make sure you stay in the past and not drift back and forth between the present and the past. **Check this now before continuing on.**

Step Four

Now continue by using the next sentence to still further develop your story:

Looking nervously in every direction, Amelia followed Sir Colin up the narrow, winding staircase.

In this section, describe the inside of the house: the atmosphere, the furnishings, the lighting, etc. Also show the reader how Amelia feels, what she's thinking, her reaction to Sir Colin, etc. Include where he takes her and what happens after he leaves her. Keep in mind the features of the gothic mystery as you write. The section introduces the **conflict**. Further heighten the tension and suspense.

Step Five

Keeping in mind logical and smooth transitions, use this sentence to continue:

Sir Colin Sweetwater the master of High Towers, often disappeared mysteriously in the middle of the night.

In this part, you start to make the reader aware of a coming **crisis**. **Hint** at why he leaves mysteriously and so often but actually don't tell the reader yet unless it doesn't give your plot away to do so. **Develop Sir Colin's character** by telling about him: what he's wearing, what he has with him, where he goes, what he does, etc. Refer to the chart to remind yourself of the qualities of a gothic hero. Also, what is the night like? The weather? The moon? Drop some hints (**foreshadowing**) of what might follow later in the story. Also, look ahead to the next sentence to see where the story is going. Revise as necessary to keep logic and fluency. **The plot thickens. Mystery is heightened.**

Step Six

Continue your story with this sentence:

Amelia, looking out of her bedroom window, watched Sir Colin disappear into the night.

Now continue to develop Amelia's character. Tell how she feels about Sir Colin now. Let the reader know what she is thinking, how she feels about being at High Towers, what she's been doing, etc. **CAUTION: Read the next sentence you'll be using in Step Seven so that when you get to it, you will have built a logical sequence of events. Develop Amelia's character and move the story along. Begin to plant seeds about the outcome.**

Step Seven

Continue with this sentence:

One night, the grave digger in the churchyard near High Towers, dug up an object, which he gave to Amelia.

This begins the **climax** of the story. The events of the plot start to come together but are not yet revealed. What is the object? Why does he give it to Amelia? Does the object have anything to do with the manor? What, if anything, does it have to do with Sir Colin's mysterious night visits? What does she do with the object? Is the grave digger important to the story or just a minor character? Is it lucky or unlucky? What connection does it have to the relationship between Sir Colin and Amelia? **Start to unravel the plot.**

A Note of Caution: At this point it's easy to lose logic and continuity. Go back and check to see that everything makes sense and has been sufficiently explained.

Step Eight

Here is the final sentence that introduces the **denouement** (resolution) of the story. Make sure that before using it you have led up to this moment in a logical manner.

Finally, June 13th, the long-awaited day, arrived.

Include the following: Why the day is important, why it has been long-awaited, what happens between Amelia and Sir Colin on that day, what the secret of the manor is and how it is revealed, whether the grave digger is involved, what the future of Sir Colin and Amelia is, how all the parts of the mystery are resolved. This is probably the hardest part of the writing because the temptation is to wrap everything up in a hurry, thus not giving a good ending to the story. Here is where you need to read back over your story very carefully to make sure that you have prepared the reader for everything that happens at the end. There should have been some **foreshadowing** of events. Come to a **logical** conclusion. **The ending has to make sense in light of what has gone before.**

What's Next?

Your next step is to proofread carefully for spelling, punctuation, usage errors, etc. Also check once again for the following:

- Correct use of tense (past)
- Correct punctuation, including dialogue
- Paragraphing
- Smooth transitions
- Strong action verbs

Don't Forget

After revision and proofreading your story must be neatly typed and have an artistic cover.

Checkpoints

Checkpoint One

Does the story have a **theme**? Unless the story says something, it has little reason for being. The theme may never be quoted verbatim in the story, but it is always the hub around which the story revolves. You should be able to state in a single clear, concise sentence what the story says.

Checkpoint Two

Does the story have a **good opening**? Does the story begin as close to the climax as possible? By the end of the first 1/5 of the story, did you have an emotion toward the **protagonist** and interest in the **situation**? Did the opening indicate the age, sex, and appearance of the protagonist? Did it set the stage with the **mood** of the story? Did it give a hint of the **conflict**?

Checkpoint Three

Does the story contain an element of strong **conflict**? Man against man, man against God, man against nature, man against society, man against himself—the protagonist should be pitted against a big problem. Sometimes the story contains a double-barreled problem interwove skillfully in a **sub-plot**.

Checkpoint Four

Is the story free from **predictability**? Sometimes the reader may be able to guess the eventual outcome without losing interest, if the means by which the end is achieved keeps him guessing.

Checkpoint Five

Does the story have a **dark moment**? Every story usually should have a low point at which all seems lost for the heroine.

Checkpoint Six

Is **coincidence** used as an easy solution? Here is rule that many writers use: “A writer is free to use coincidence to get his characters into trouble, but they must climb out under their own power.”

Checkpoint Seven

Has something changed in the story? If, at the end of the story, the characters are in exactly the same situation that they were at the beginning, or if they have not changed to adapt to their problems, it isn't really a story. No matter how beautifully written, how penetrating the insight—it is only a sketch.

Checkpoint Eight

The author must make his readers care about the lead characters—even if one of them is a scoundrel. The reader should cheer for things to turn out right.