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The Horror Prompt Guide for 2026

A horror prompt is a writing idea that gives you a scary place to start. A good one names the kind of fear, the mood, the place, the threat and the way the scene is told, then leaves room for your imagination. This guide covers the five parts of a horror prompt, the six subgenres, tone words, ways to build tension, twelve ready prompts and a page to plan your own scary story.

The five parts of a horror prompt

1. **Subgenre.** The kind of fear: psychological, supernatural, cosmic, found footage, slasher or survival.
2. **Tone.** How the fear arrives: a slow burn, an intense rush, a creeping wrongness or a sharp shock.
3. **Setting.** Where it happens. A familiar place made strange, like a kitchen or a school bus, is often scarier than a castle.
4. **Threat.** What the characters face: a ghost, a demon, a cult, a creature, a possession or their own mind.
5. **Format.** How it is told: a scene setup, an opening paragraph, a dialogue, a creepy description or a first-person monologue.

A horror prompt template to fill in

Normal moment: _____ is _____ (an everyday place and task).
The first wrong detail: They notice _____.
The threat: _____, and we never fully see it.
The stakes: If they _____, then _____.
The last line: End on a question the reader cannot stop thinking about.

Before: "A haunted house story." After: "The new owners of the farmhouse keep setting the table for four. There are only three of them, and each night the fourth chair has been pulled out a little further."

The six subgenres and when to use each

Subgenre	The fear	Works well for
Psychological	Paranoia, memory gaps, not trusting your own mind	Short stories, literary horror, unreliable narrators
Supernatural	Ghosts, spirits and things beyond explanation	Campfire tales, haunted house novels, tabletop games
Cosmic Horror	Forces too big to understand, existential dread	Sci-fi horror, RPG campaigns, slow mysteries
Found Footage	Recordings and evidence left behind	Screenplays, podcasts, stories told in documents
Slasher	Being hunted by a killer	Thrillers, film scripts, survival games
Survival Horror	Trapped, few supplies, the odds against you	Game scenarios, novellas, escape stories

Tone words

Tone	Words that carry it
Slow-Burn	quiet, again, a little further, every night, still
Intense	run, now, slam, breath, too close
Creepy	humming, damp, smiling, too long, not quite
Suspenseful	waiting, almost, a sound behind, the handle turns
Disturbing	wrong, familiar, it remembers you, the same face

Five ways to build tension

1. **Start normal.** Show an everyday moment before anything goes wrong.
2. **Use the senses.** A smell, a sound or a cold spot is scarier than a description of a monster.
3. **Delay the reveal.** Let the reader see a shadow, a footprint or a door left open before the threat itself.
4. **Make it personal.** Give the threat a link to the character: a name, a memory, a song.
5. **Leave a gap.** Do not explain everything. The unknown is often the most frightening part.

Twelve ready horror prompts

1. Every morning, Nora finds one more photo in the family album that she does not remember taking. Today's photo shows the kitchen from outside the window.
2. The new owners of the farmhouse keep setting the table for four. There are only three of them.
3. The radio telescope decodes a signal. It is a list of names, and the last three belong to people in the control room.
4. The trail camera footage runs for 41 minutes. In the last minute, the camera is turned to face the tent.
5. "Did you lock the back door?" "Yes. Twice." "Then why is the kettle warm?"
6. I have one torch and a map of the hospital from 1974. The east wing is not on it.
7. A lighthouse keeper writes in the log every night. The entries continue for six months after he goes missing.
8. The school bus makes one stop that is not on the route. The same child gets on every day, and no one knows her name.
9. A babysitter hears the baby monitor hum a lullaby at 3 a.m. The parents say the monitor has no speaker.
10. A village holds a festival every year to "thank the forest". This year, you are the guest of honour.
11. A scientist's notes say the experiment failed. The camera in the lab shows the subject still sitting in its chair, waiting.
12. You start hearing your own voice in the next room, saying the things you were about to say.

Plan your scary story

Fill this in, then turn it into three horror prompts on the Horror Prompt Generator.

Your idea, and the place where it happens

The threat, the mood, and how the story is told

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