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The Horror Story Guide, 2026

Good horror builds dread before it shows fear. This guide puts the nine subgenres side by side, explains the four formats and gives you a check list for building dread.

The nine subgenres at a glance

Subgenre	Where the fear comes from
Psychological	The protagonist's own mind and perception
Supernatural	Ghosts, curses and possession, with rules
Slasher	A stalking threat and the people who try to survive it
Gothic	Old houses, family secrets, a past that stays
Cosmic	Something vast and alien beyond understanding
Found footage	Recordings, logs and notes found afterwards
Body horror	The body changing in ways it should not
Folk horror	A rural community and its old rituals
Haunted house	The building itself as the threat

The four formats

- **Flash fiction (about 250 words):** a complete story with an ending that lands.
- **Short story (about 500 words):** more scene-setting before the horror arrives.
- **Story opening (about 300 words):** tension with no ending, for a chapter start.
- **Full plot outline:** premise, characters, setup, escalation, climax and twist.

Short horror in one sitting

- A tale should be short enough to read at one sitting.
- Decide the single effect first, then choose the incidents that build it.

Source: Edgar Allan Poe, review of Twice-Told Tales (1842), the Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore.

Dread check list

☐ Something small is wrong in the first paragraph.

☐ The threat is glimpsed, never fully shown.

☐ The reader knows something before the character does.

☐ The setting works against the character.

☐ The ending changes what came before it.

☐ The last line leaves an image.

Plan your story

Premise: _____

Subgenre: _____ Setting: _____

The single effect: _____

The final image: _____

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