



THE FRESH ALCHEMY

GOthic
WRITING
GUIDE

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WELCOME



Gothic Literature is one of my very favorite genres, and one I have spent most of my learning and writing career exploring. As the author of two modern gothic romances, *Bloodborn* and *Bloodmad*, I know what it takes to write an engaging gothic story.

Now I'm happy to share what I've learned in an easy guide that will set you along that path to writing gothic prose yourself.

Whether you are a published author already, have a story you've been working on, or are in those beginning brainstorming stages, this guide will help you see beyond the shadows to add a few extra cobwebs and creaky floorboards to your work.

I'm so excited for your projects, to hear your voice, and to see your story on the page. There's a writer in everyone. All you need is a little fresh alchemy to bring you to the other side.

Stephanie Kemler

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WHAT IS GOTHIC LIT



We know it when we see it: those gothic novels, movies, and TV shows with creaky floorboards, mysterious characters, dark secrets, vampires, werewolves, blood, knives, gore, and death. Bram Stoker's "Dracula" is one of the most well-known examples of the genre, but it is not the first nor is it the only one. Where would gothic lit be without Mary Shelley, Anne Rice, and Daphne du Maurier?

In the 17th century, Romanticism was both a reaction to the ever-logical and not-so-magical Enlightenment and the precursor to the Gothic. While Romanticism emphasized the emotional, melancholic, and the hereafter, Gothic writers went further with eerie settings, the supernatural, fear, dread, and curses.

One of the very first Gothic novels was Horace Walpole's "The Castle of Otranto" in 1764. It was such a popular novel that the genre exploded and gave birth to legendary stories like "Frankenstein," "Carmilla," and eventually novels like "Jane Eyre" and "The Vampire Diaries."

As a writer of vampire gothic romance of course the most memorable to me are the be-fanged stories, but I really love them all. "Frankenstein" had a really profound impact on my writing, not just because Mary Shelley was a hard worker and profoundly talented, but because the themes in that novel are universal. Lost innocence, family drama, and the uncertainty and terror that can come from a rapidly changing world.

To me that's the heart of the Gothic. When things are hard, when the world changes just a little bit faster than we might like, when faith and technology don't provide all the answers we've been looking for, when violence, disease, and death become the norm and neighbors can swiftly turn into enemies, horror and the Gothic are a safe way to explore our fears.

I find so much comfort reading about dark castles, fangs, and terrors around every corner. Like riding a rollercoaster, when I'm safe in my own body and mind I can experience fear without having to live it.

ELEMENTS OF GOTHIC LIT



Now that we've had a little peek into the origins and the "why" of Gothic literature, I'd like to break down the individual elements so you can add a few or most or all of them to your projects. Have no fear though! There's no right amount of Gothic elements you need to have for your work to be considered "officially Gothic." Pick and choose the ones that resonate most with you and your story will be authentically Gothic. And feel free to be fresh and inventive and play with these tropes.

When I wrote my debut novel *Bloodborn*, I had a family of blood-drinkers in the modern era who looked and acted nothing like the vampires I had come to know and love in Gothic novels. Instead of being hung up on doing things "right" I took things in the modern era and made them my own version of Gothic. An empty music venue? Absolutely has the feel of

a Gothic castle. An inpatient treatment facility for mental illness? Why not use modern medicine, science, a conscientious, compassionate doctor and then add on a spider who may or may not be communicating with the main character? And you can do that too! Make it your own. Pick and choose from this list what you love most.

Atmosphere - Atmosphere is everything in the Gothic. You can even consider it another character. On its surface, it can look like shadows in forests, winding hallways in castles lit by candelabras, sounds that go bump in the night. Those aren't a checklist but they can give you a good idea of what it can feel like: claustrophobic, sinister, foreboding, and just plain creepy. Use your five senses and get into it!

Complicated Characters - What would "Jane Eyre" be without the brooding Mr. Rochester wandering around his mansion in the middle of the night? And what would it be without its enigmatic and tragic heroine Jane? Gothic characters have a depth and darkness that makes them memorable and distinct. Solid characters are the beating heart of every story, but dig beneath the surface with your Gothic cast and see what pains them most, what frightens them, what keeps them up at night. Supporting characters can be a nice foil to the main characters, being a kind of stand-in for a reader, or they can be a part of the landscape of general creepiness. Don't underwrite them of course, but put most of your time and effort into those all-important main characters.

ELEMENTS OF GOTHIC LIT



Secrets, Suspense, and the Supernatural - This is a place where you can really have a lot of fun. What's the dark secret of the family in the crumbling mansion? How close will your main characters get to the stony cliffs before they fall off? Will your story involve fantastical creatures you've invented yourself? While the supernatural is by no means required for the genre, and I've read so many great stories without it, it can be a great way to draw in a reader serving both mystery and danger. If you're new to writing suspense, it might be helpful to study how film directors create suspense and watch how it unfolds. I've learned so much from Hitchcock here. Southern Gothic writers like William Faulkner do a fantastic job with secrets and mysteries and is worth reading for that alone.

Atmospheric Writing, Language, and Voice - I think narrative voice is one of the most difficult things to describe to new or inexperienced writers and one of the most challenging to execute. For me, it's all about intuition, confidence, and a whole lot of practice. While I might be approachable when I'm writing an instagram caption or in this guide, my Gothic prose is quite a bit different. Not less honest or authentic, it just reflects a more formal, artistic, and stylized way of writing. Does your Gothic writing look like wink-and-a-nod Gothic references, terse and terrifying prose, or a languid style that lulls a reader into a sense of safety before you tear them to shreds? It can be interesting to adopt the style of other authors while you're practicing and then let loose with yourself when it comes time to telling your own story.

While there are other specific elements like the dream world of characters, melodrama, and the monsters lurking in all of us, these can give you a great start for a new Gothic writing project or a little fresh energy if you're a veteran writer. It can be helpful to remind yourself of the basics from time to time.

What I find most exciting about these elements is that there is so much diversity in how a writer interprets them. Making a pirate love story a Gothic romance? Sure! Creating vampires that are mortal? Why not? Setting your book in the Pacific Northwest instead of Transylvania? Love it! You can bring in themes that resonate with you and push the Gothic in new directions. Make it as political or funny or anthropological or symbolic as you like.

THINK IT THROUGH



Whether you're at the very beginning of writing, have an unfinished story, or have a finished project ready for revisions, it can be really helpful to take a step and do something thinking about where you are and where you're headed.

I find journaling to be one of the best ways to get a good handle on my writing. I don't even use a quill pen on parchment. Almost every time it's a fresh page in my Notes app with a title like "Sorting Through This Mess." It's the thinking through things that's most important. These are just a few prompts to get you started and ones I informally use every time I start a new project.

WHAT DO I LOVE?

Think about what books, authors, movies, directors, or TV shows you love, what characters are most memorable to you, and what excites you most about the Gothic genre. It's even helpful to scroll through images on Pinterest and Instagram of Gothic elements that stand out to you. Do you love castles, fangs, and candelabras? Do fog-covered cemeteries and crumbling monuments show up frequently in your favorites? Repeated patterns can help you identify what's essential and what you might want to adopt in your work.

YES, NO, OR MAYBE?

When I decided to write a novel about blood-drinkers, I took every single vampire trope I could think of, wrote them down, and then placed them in columns with the titles "Yes," "No," and "Maybe." For me, the physical act of drinking blood was a non-negotiable. I just love that element in vampire fiction. Immortality was a no because it's more fun if the danger is high and the risks are even higher. A maybe? Transylvania. In the end I kept the location for backstory and really dug into the history and culture of that part of Romania. It's up to you to decide what most resonates with you in Gothic literature and then build a story around it.

WHAT MATTERS TO ME?

Like I mentioned on the very first page of this writing guide, Gothic literature began as a reaction to the Enlightenment. Since then, these stories shift and bend based on when they are written, who is doing the writing, and the "why" behind it all. It is a very symbolic genre that often takes issues of morality, ethics, faith, gender roles, and politics seriously. Even though I wrote *Bloodborn* and *Bloodmad* to be on their surface readable, enjoyable, and entertaining, I also added certain parts of me and my outlook to give them a bit more depth if you scratch the surface (or the lid of your coffin). If you haven't already, take time to really consider what matters to you as a creator, what kind of legacy you might want to leave, and the things that keep you up at night.



Write!

Don't let perfectionism or fear keep you from diving right into your own Gothic stories. Do some brainstorming, journaling, take notes, and then just get into it! You have everything in you already to write a story you'll love. If no one has seen your project yet, try to treasure this time to play, experiment, and make a mess without anybody watching over your shoulder. You can write a little every day, a lot in big chunks of time, or a mad dash during NaNoWriMo. As long as it works for you and helps put words on the page, it's the right technique.



Find your community

One of the most pivotal actions I took for my writing career was plugging into the online writing community. I finally had a place to talk shop, compare notes, and share my work before it was even published. I felt a lot less alone in a group of other writers just like me. To this day, some of my very closest friends came from this community. It doesn't have to be online. Fellow writers, critique partners, and early readers of each project can come from the places in your daily life. Keep an eye out for library announcements, fliers in coffee shops, and workshops that pop up from time to time.



Reach Out

I'm always available on Instagram where I post all my virtual and in-person appearances and answer DMs from writers just like you. I'm also offering my Fresh Alchemy Writing Mentorship if you want to move your writing forward. Whether you're a novice or have a library of published books, it's amazing how much your projects can grow in a structured way with a professional Gothic writer. Reach out about specifics including rates, availability, and my fierce belief that when you look inside, you'll find the best writer you can be waiting right there for you.

WHAT'S NEXT?