



Terrifying Villain

CHEAT SHEET

StoryEmbers.org



The Terrifying Villain Brainstorming Cheat Sheet

A Guide by Gabrielle Pollack

So you want your villain to be intimidating. And I know why. Bad guys make stories exciting. They provide drama. They make victory oh so much sweeter. Hopefully you've learned all about this in the [intimidating villains article](#), written by yours truly.

It's time to put what you've learned into practice. Below, you'll find a step-by-step guide you can follow to help you create a bad guy who will give readers shivers. To use this guide to maximum effectiveness, be sure to write down your work for each step before moving on to the next one.

Let's get started, shall we?



Step One: Make Your Villain Scary

Before you can make your villain terrifying, you need to fully develop him as a character.

1. Give your villain something to define him that builds his notoriety.

What does he excel at? When people hear his name, what's the first thing they think of? Cruelty? Cannibalism? An impeccable sense of style?

Example: In *Avengers*, Loki is a poetic showman who wears a horned crown. His attack on earth seals his notoriety, but these quirks help readers remember him.

Quick Tip: If you don't know your villain's strongest skill, figure out what your hero is best at and make your villain better at that. Making your villain the stronger one will raise the stakes and force your hero to improve and improvise.

2. Choose one concrete way that your protagonist encounters your villain's work.

What evidence might he leave behind on his path toward his goal? Leveled cities? Letters full of libel? A pair of glass slippers beside a poisoned queen? Brainstorm details that will best communicate his evil intentions and central traits.

Example: In Patrick Carr's *Shock of Night*, the protagonist examines a bloody crime scene, effectively witnessing the enemy's speed, cruelty, and power long before he encounters them.

Quick Tip: If possible, show both the large-scale and small-scale impact of your villain. Readers want to know that he's leveled cities but also that your hero's best friend's dad lost his life in that city. If you make your villain both public and personal, the danger will feel closer to home.



3. Plan a few moments where your protagonist hears others talking about the villain.

How do rulers publicize his deeds? What does the workman say around a tavern table and a mug full of ale? Do mothers scare their children into behaving with tales of his crimes, or do they refuse to say his name? Is he a fairy tale, a news story, or both?

Example: In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the wizarding world is so concentrated on avoiding talking about Voldemort that readers are hammered with the impression that this guy is bad news.

Quick Tip: If possible, show your villain's work before his victims start talking about him. If readers see a demonstration before they hear about his other deeds, they'll be more ready to believe in your villain's malevolence.

4. Determine how your protagonist will personally suffer at the villain's hands.

What does the protagonist value that a villain can take? How will losing that thing make the protagonist question her beliefs and resolve?

Example: In Brandon Sanderson's *Skyward*, Spensa takes flight to fight the Krel. It's only her second battle, but two of her teammates are killed. This shock establishes the power of the enemy—and shows just how fragile a human's last defenses are in comparison.

Quick Tip: Match the level of your protagonist's loss with the progression of the stakes. You don't want your villain to kill your hero's sister within the first few pages, then have to meet that level of destruction every time the villain comes around. Be creative with how your villain attacks your protagonist, and save the worst losses for later in the story.



Step Two: Set Your Villain Against Your Hero

Your villain can't be scary if he's not connected to your story. To make him the villain that readers deserve, you need to place him between the protagonist and her goal.

1. Determine a goal for your villain that's directly opposed to the protagonist's.

What is your villain after? How does this goal clash with your protagonist?

Example: In *Tangled*, Mother Gothel's goal is to keep Rapunzel by her side for eternity. Rapunzel, on the other hand, is eager to see the world. This understandably puts them at odds.

Quick Tip: If you can't find your villain's goal, find your protagonist's goal and invert it. If your hero wants to save the world, your villain wants to burn it.

2. Determine your villain's motivation behind that goal.

Why does your villain act the way he does? Is he fighting for a cause, a value, control, love, vengeance?

Example: In *Six of Crows*, antihero/villain Kaz Brekker centers his mission on wreaking vengeance on Pekka Rollings, the man who cheated Brekker and his brother when they were young.

Quick Tip: If you don't know the reasons behind your villain's choices, look to your protagonist. Her goals may be similar, but how she pursues them could create conflict.



3. Choose the villain's rationale for his goal.

How does he justify his shady actions?

Example: In *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, Mayor Prentiss is a complicated man, twisted by his desire to control the world. He uses his goal, and the belief in his own superiority, to justify the lives he ends.

Quick Tip: The scariest villains are the ones readers can understand. Their rationale should match thoughts or desires or decisions that readers have experienced, albeit on a smaller scale.

4. Find a backstory that explains the “why” behind your villain.

How does your character become who he is? What moment in his life taught him his core lie?

Example: In *Warden and the Wolf King*, Gnag believes he was nameless, abandoned, and unloved at birth. He grew up with monsters and was told that his destiny is to crush the kingdom that abandoned him.

Quick Tip: If you're struggling to make your character's backstory unique, change how much responsibility he has over his choices. Was he exiled, or did he choose to run away? Did he kill the protagonist's parents when he was young, or did the protagonist murder them? Was he given a time-traveling blue police box, or did he steal it? When you give your villain agency over the defining events in his past, you add a unique twist to common backstory tropes.



Further Resources

Want to learn more about villains? Check out these other articles by the Story Embers team:

- [Why Realistic Motives Alone Don't Create Believable Villains](#) by Gabrielle Pollack
- [Lessons Thanos and Ultron Teach about Creating Sympathetic Villains](#) by Brandon Miller
- [Why Villains Need Character Arcs Too and How to Pull Them Off](#) by Martin Detwiler
- [4 Traits Villains Need to Effectively Oppose Protagonists](#) by Maddie Morrow
- [How to Avoid Cheap Grace When Redeeming a Villain](#) by Josiah DeGraaf