



Science fiction, fantasy and horror stories are full of monsters. But one of a writer's toughest jobs is coming up with creatures that are new and interesting.

When I sat down to write my urban fantasy novel, *A Kiss Before Doomsday*, I knew that the bad guys would be undead creatures. But today's readers have seen countless undead foes. How do you put a brand-new spin on such an old idea?

### **The Secret to Making Monsters**

The secret to creating compelling monsters can be found in the word itself. MONSTER makes a useful acronym:

- M is for Mind
- O is for Origin
- N is for Need
- S is for Sketch
- T is for Take On
- E is for Eat
- R is for Relationships

To create a truly unique, complex monster, look carefully at each of these aspects, then ask yourself questions and write down the answers. By the time you finish, you'll have a monster that's not only frightening, it's also fascinating.

## **M is for Mind**

Some monsters are literally mindless. But even a monster as dumb as a box of rocks can be frightening, as long as it's single-minded in its pursuit of the characters.

While a relentless menace can be scary, you can make a monster even more terrifying by making it smart. Show the monster learning from past mistakes, and adopting new tactics to pursue the heroes. Intelligent monsters will tend to predict the heroes' movements and may even lay traps for them.

In my book, I wanted to avoid dumb monsters. Instead, I envisioned the monsters working together as they chased the heroes. These creatures needed some kind of pack mentality. Maybe not as intelligent as the heroes, but cunning enough to present a real threat.

## **O is for Origin**

Monsters don't exist in a vacuum. They must live in some kind of natural habitat. Where does your monster come from?

Is it a relic from the distant past? Was it brought here from a different land (or planet) only to run amok? Was it created by someone who accidentally or deliberately set it loose on the world?

The undead creatures in my book were definitely created by some kind of evil magic. But where did they come from?

In my previous book, the monsters were the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, and they drove demon-possessed muscle cars. That inevitably led to some outrageous high-speed car chases, which the readers loved. I wanted to do more of that in this book. But how?

That's when I came up with the idea of having the undead creatures rise up from a junkyard. What if I put them on wheels? In fact, what if I gave these things motorcycles to ride, and made them an undead motorcycle gang?

That's an idea I'd never heard of before. Plus, it was funny, so I was instantly intrigued.

## **N is for Need**

What motivates your monster? What is it after, besides trying to kill the heroes?

In fiction, most monsters seem to exist for the sole purpose of trying to eat people. That's one way to do it. But you can instantly make your monster more interesting by giving it an unusual need. For example, it may need to:

- Guard its territory.
- Reproduce.
- Destroy its competition.
- Find or build a new nest.
- Gather nest-building materials.
- Rejoin its kind.
- Defend its young.
- Feed its young.

In my book, I decided to give the monsters an infectious disease, which they need to spread by touch. That gives them the perfect excuse to constantly reach towards the heroes with creepy grasping fingers.

## **S is for Sketch**

Think about what your monster looks like. Sketch it out in your mind. Draw a vivid mental picture with words.

How large or small is it, exactly? Larger than a grizzly bear? Smaller than a scorpion? Also think about the relative size of different parts of your monster. If it has a tail, wings, long legs, or some other defining feature, spend a few sentences describing the part.

What covers its body: fur, leathery skin, armored plates? Can you give it an unusual color or texture to make it more interesting?

What does it sound like? What does it smell like?

Also, don't forget to describe how it moves. Can you make it slither, scuttle, or creep? Can you give it an unsettling, lopsided gait?

Remember that you don't have to reveal the entire creature at once. Consider giving your reader just a glimpse of the monster at first. We naturally fear the unknown. So the slower you reveal your monster's physical appearance, the scarier it becomes.

Sooner or later, your monster will be revealed in all its gruesome glory, and that's why you (the writer) need to know what it really looks like. In your notebook, take some time to describe your monster's physical appearance.

In my book, I wanted to do something other than your standard zombies, which we've all seen a million times. So I looked around for inspiration.

One time, when I was a kid, I found a creepy weather-beaten motorcycle that had a staring

socket where its headlight used to be. The gas tank was blistered with rust. The gutted frame had no engine, only a gaping void curtained in by cobwebs and dead bugs. I decided to use those elements to describe my monsters: undead creatures wrapped in spider webs and riding ruined old motorcycles.

## **T is for Take On**

The most frightening monsters are seemingly unstoppable. But sooner or later, your characters will have to confront your monster, and hopefully triumph.

How can your characters fight this thing, escape it, or otherwise neutralize its threat? What could hurt this monster? What could scare it off?

Don't give away the answers. Force your heroes to work hard at discovering the monster's weakness, and you will instantly make your story more interesting.

In my book, I wanted to make the heroes' job as difficult as possible, so I gave the monsters a deadly touch. Anyone who comes into contact with them risks becoming infected and turning into an undead creature. How do you fight something you can't touch? That added an extra challenge to the story.

## **E is for Eat**

There's a reason why so many monsters have prominent teeth. Getting eaten is one of our most primal fears, and creating a monster intent on devouring your heroes is the quickest way to scare your readers.

What does this particular monster eat? And how does it eat, exactly?

There are countless examples of undead creatures who consume human blood or brains. But my urban fantasy series is funny and lighthearted, and nobody's actually going to get devoured by undead creatures. Still, I decided to hint at the threat by giving my monsters some particularly nasty chompers.

## **R is for Relationships**

Even monsters have some sort of relationship to others of their kind. Are they loners, or do they form a pack? Does this particular monster belong to someone? Does it obey them, and if so, to what extent? Does this monster rule over someone or something else?

Ask yourself how your monster relates to others, and how it relates to the world around it. The answers will help you build a more complex creature.

In my book, I wanted the undead creatures to form a horrific motorcycle gang. But pondering their relationships got me thinking about whether there could be someone else controlling them. Almost immediately, I hit upon the idea of an evil necromancer summoning up these dark servants on wheels. And just like that, the rest of the plot clicked into place for me.

## **Putting It All Together**

Keep in mind that even though you've figured out everything about your monster, you don't have to reveal it to the reader all at once. You just need to show enough to pique the reader's interest and keep them turning pages.

Below is an excerpt from my book, *A Kiss Before Doomsday*, that introduces the undead motorcycle gang I created using the MONSTER method. As you read, pay attention to how much I reveal about the seven aspects of a monster: Mind, Origin, Need, Sketch, Take On, Eat, and Relationships.

Some elements are fairly prominent (the sharp teeth are a dead giveaway), while others are kept secret until later. See if you can spot which is which.

### **Excerpt from [\*A Kiss Before Doomsday\*](#)**

Ahead, the watery yellow headlamps of old motorcycles rolled past the stop sign without slowing down. A half-dozen motorcycles. Then a dozen. They quickly spread out across the rain-slick intersection, blocking the way, throaty engines barking.

Greyson slowed the black muscle car to a stop. He gripped the steering wheel and frowned. The motorcycle riders, most of them hunched low over their handlebars, were wrapped in some kind of semitransparent gauzy material that trembled and shook in the falling rain.

Thick layers of what resembled spiderwebs wrapped the leather-clad riders to their old, rusted mounts. It was impossible to tell where a motorcycle ended and its rider began. It was as if they had become one.

One of the riders rolled up to Greyson's window. He lifted one arm from the handlebars as if in greeting, and the gauzy material tore away and fluttered in the wind.

Something seemed to awaken beneath the webs that wrapped around the rider. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of wriggling dark streaks swayed back and forth in unison, as if washed by some invisible tide.

Beneath the old-style visorless motorcycle helmet, there was no face. Only cloudy goggles over a stained skull wrapped in black-speckled webs dotted with rain. The creature's bony jaw opened wide, revealing sharp teeth. His fingers bent, and sharp black tips pierced through the webs, like claws.

Greyson didn't wait to see what would happen next. He shoved the gearshift into reverse, released the clutch, and fed the heavy gas pedal, sending his car shooting back out of the creature's grasp.

The skeletal figure, wrapped in layers of black-speckled cobwebs, opened its bony jaw and shrieked in frustration.

## Create Your Own Monsters

The next time you need to create a monster for a story or novel, use the worksheet at the end of this document. Fill in each step of the MONSTER acronym:

- M is for Mind
- O is for Origin
- N is for Need
- S is for Sketch
- T is for Take On
- E is for Eat
- R is for Relationships

Think about each aspect of your monster, ask yourself questions, and write down the answers. Keep those notes handy as you write the story. Before you know it, your characters will face foes that are original, interesting, and truly frightening.

## About the Author



*Laurence MacNaughton is the award-winning author of more than a dozen novels, novellas, and short stories. His work has been praised by Booklist, Publishers Weekly, RT Book Reviews, Library Journal, and Kirkus Reviews. He lives in Colorado with his wife and too many old cars. Try his stories free at [www.LaurenceMacNaughton.com](http://www.LaurenceMacNaughton.com)*

## WORKSHEET: 7 Secrets to Creating Bloodcurdling Monsters

Directions: Jot down your ideas in any order. Fill in all seven elements before you start writing.

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Get more free writing tips at [www.LaurenceMacNaughton.com](http://www.LaurenceMacNaughton.com)