



WRITER

EMERGENCY PACK



When your story gets stuck, Writer Emergency Pack has the tools you need. Fix plot holes. Spice up stock characters. Rethink your themes.

Writer Emergency Pack gives you the questions that lead to great answers.

Writer Emergency Pack

In Case of Writer Emergency, remain calm and [Click for a random card](#). Or choose from the following menu:

[Card 1: Cause and Effect](#)

[Card 2: Fight the Giant](#)

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Actions have consequences. How can the next few events result *because of* something your hero does?

Everything happens for a reason. Usually, that reason should be your hero. Look for ways he can take the reins of the story.

There's nothing wrong with a "passive" hero as long as his passivity alters the course of the story. (By his doing nothing, something changes.)

Consider reversing the cause and effect. What if your hero robs a bank *because* he's a fugitive? What if your doctor causes rather than cures the epidemic?

Try this:

- Talk through your story, replacing every "and then" with "because." What would need to change?
- Imagine your story being told in reverse, Memento-style. How could your setups become payoffs?
- The biggest effects come from irrevocable choices. List three decisions your hero couldn't take back.



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Your hero will have to face her adversary at some point. Why not right now?

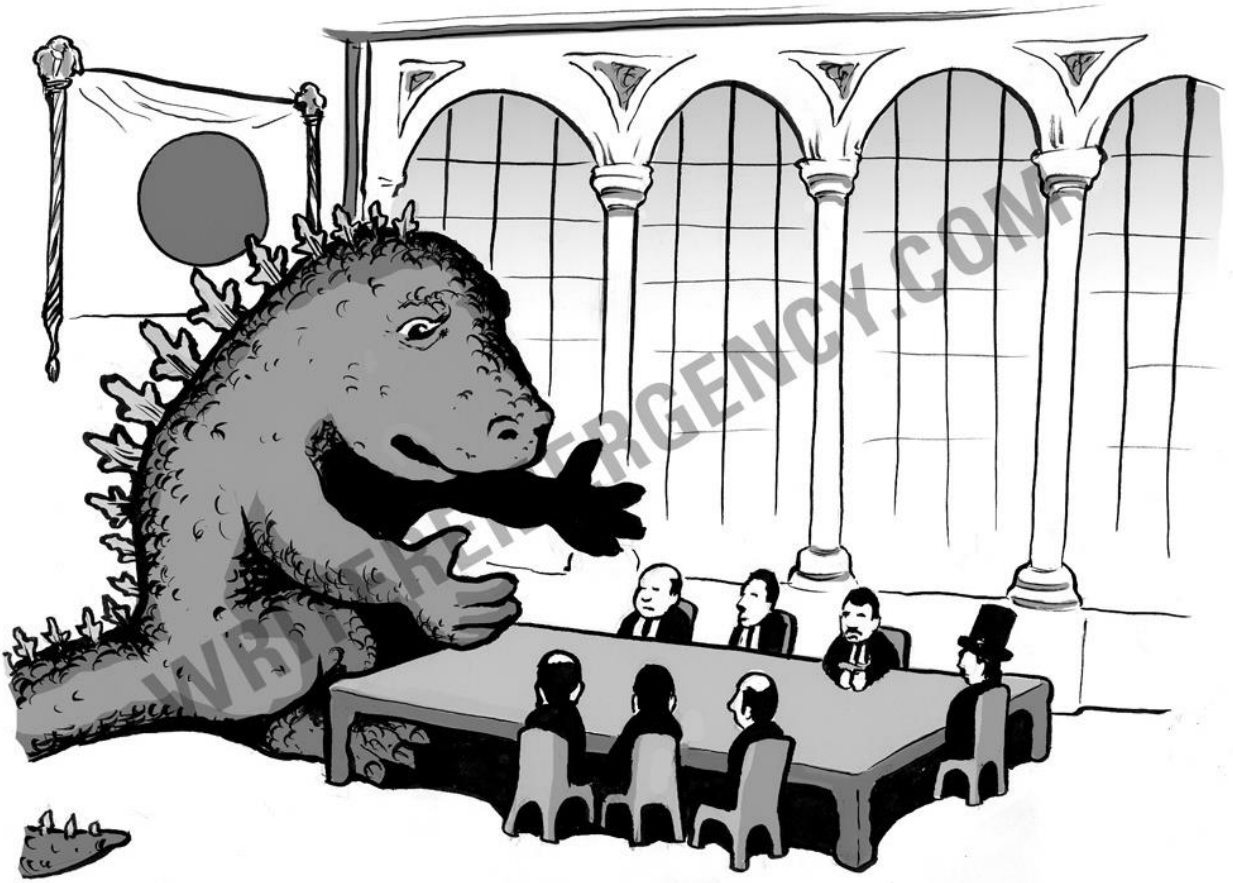
We usually think of showdowns coming at the end of the story, but early battles allow for new complications.

A crushing defeat gives your hero something to prove. Does she doubt herself? Will her allies stand with her?

A surprising victory could turn an enemy into an ally, or spawn an even more powerful Big Bad — perhaps the mother or brother of the defeated.

Try this:

- List three ways the enemy could bring the fight to the hero right now.
- If your hero has a plan, how can he be forced to accelerate it? Perhaps he learns new information, or a window of opportunity is closing.
- Coincidence happens. Brainstorm three ways your hero and antagonist could find themselves in the same location unexpectedly.



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If your hero and the antagonist had an honest discussion, what would they say to each other?

Perhaps your hero and the antagonist are not so far apart — or maybe it's much worse than either of them realized. A conversation will make it clear. Sometimes it's a stranger that your hero opens up to, revealing truths she herself didn't comprehend.

This conversation may never make it into the story, but it can reveal what's driving your characters in the moment. It may also give you useful dialogue. So don't hold back. Let them get everything off their chests.

Try this:

- List three locations or situations in which your hero and your adversary could talk at length.
- Brainstorm three characters your hero could confide in.
- Imagine a conversation between your hero and his younger self. What advice would he give?
- If your antagonist is non-human (e.g., a storm, an island, the alien in *Alien*) imagine it as a person. How does it speak? How would it describe what it wants?



Give your hero new responsibilities, including a chance to prove herself.

Let your hero become the boss, or the new janitor. It doesn't have to be a profession. Give him a baby to take care of — or maybe a baby elephant. New obligations mean new options, both for the hero and the story.

Like judo, you're looking for ways to play your hero's strengths against him. Make the lone wolf lead the mission. Make the captain shovel coal.

Or maybe your hero used to have this job, but left it behind. What would bring her back?

Try this:

- List three interesting jobs in your world, then brainstorm how your hero might fill them.
- Imagine your hero is drafting a resume. What would she list for "career goals?"
- If your hero were to pretend to have another occupation, what might it be?



Imagine your story as told by an omniscient narrator. What would Morgan Freeman say?

What would your narrator tell us? Would he simply provide backstory, or connect the dots along the way? Would he be a character in the story itself — perhaps framing events that happened in the past — or exist outside the plot?

Narrators tell us what's important, and often state the lesson of the story. Even if you don't use a narrator, knowing what one might say can reveal unexplored themes.

Try this:

- Tell your story out loud with your best storyteller voice. Try to use a lot of “althoughs” and “meanwhiles.”
- What if your narrator is lying, or otherwise unreliable? Consider ways you could misdirect the reader.
- List three characters who could narrate the story. How would it change with each of them?
- Imagine your story narrated by a famous actress, a famous rapper, or a cartoon character.



Your antagonist probably thinks he's the good guy. Imagine the story from his perspective.

What is the villain trying to do? Beyond the hero, what other obstacles are in his way?

Don't stop at the villain's motivation (e.g., revenge, greed, survival). Rather, look for what the journey is. We might only see a small part of it from the hero's perspective, but knowing the whole arc gives us more to push against. Let your villain struggle and win a few times along the way. After all, he doesn't know he's the bad guy.

Try this:

- Plot out what would happen if your hero never showed up. What would the villain/antagonist do? Would a different hero rise up?
- What is your villain's greatest fear? Who does he love? Can either of these cause him to take action in your story?
- Brainstorm three moments in which your villain could be surprisingly heroic.



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What would happen if you skipped over the next few scenes/days/years?

Jumping forward gives you a chance to re-center your characters in the story, and show the effects of their actions. Like a curtain between acts, it lets you change styles and settings and seasons.

Readers can often fill in what they missed, particularly when the overall patterns are clear. We don't need to see every week at Hogwarts, because we know how schools work.

If skipping scenes makes little impact on your story, that's a clear sign you need to get rid of them.

Try this:

- Look for ways to combine scenes and locations. If your hero needs to have an argument and then go hiking, can the argument happen on the hike?
- List three events the reader might anticipate will happen in your story, such as Regionals, prom, or the wedding. Could you skip ahead to one of them?
- Think about transitions: Is there a natural way to make it clear that time has passed (e.g., Christmas trees, sunrise, graduation)?



Actions speak louder than words. If your characters couldn't talk, what would they do?

Dialogue is great, but sometimes your characters need to shut up and do something. Look for ways to take away their ability to talk, and force them to find other ways to communicate.

There are countless ways to make normal speech impossible, from stealth to equipment failure to foreign languages.

Silence can also be a choice. Maybe your hero isn't saying anything because he's simply done talking.

Try this:

- Imagine this moment in a silent film. How would you know what's going on?
- If your hero could only say five words, what would they be?
- Could the story beats happen in a montage rather than full scenes? What would those moments be?



Consider other ways your characters could be related, both now and in the past.

What if the hero and villain were brothers? Lovers? Neighbors? Childhood friends?

Every two characters in your story have a relationship, even if it's as strangers. But the most interesting relationship might not be the most obvious one, so consider many possibilities.

While you're at it, try moving the clock. Is your hero couple newlywed, or nearly-divorced? Could they meet for the first time in your story, or be celebrating twenty years?

Ask yourself: How could this relationship cause more challenges for the hero?

Try this:

- Picture your hero on a date with each of the major characters in the story. Where would they go? What would the end of the night be like?
- If all the major characters in your story were part of a single family, who would have what role? What would the arguments be?
- Pick two supporting characters and imagine them as dogs or cats. How would the story change?



What if this happened all the time? Is your hero writing the rules, or breaking them?

One character's crisis is another character's ordinary day at the office.

What would happen if this situation happened all the time? Is your hero a help or a hindrance?

Heroes often find themselves in extraordinary circumstances, but sometimes they can apply skills from their normal lives. If your hero can fix her truck, can she fix a tank? If she can lead her son's baseball team to victory, can she lead a band of survivors out of the Amazonian jungle?

The best heroes often end up breaking rules they've made.

Try this:

- Write a checklist of rules and procedures for this situation. Now look for ways they can become obstacles for your hero.
- Make a list of skills from your hero's ordinary life. How could they be adapted to fit this challenge?
- Research how this situation (or place, or job) is handled in the real world. Who is in charge? Look for protocols and gatekeepers.



Sometimes, it really is the end of the world. How would your story change if the stakes were cataclysmic?

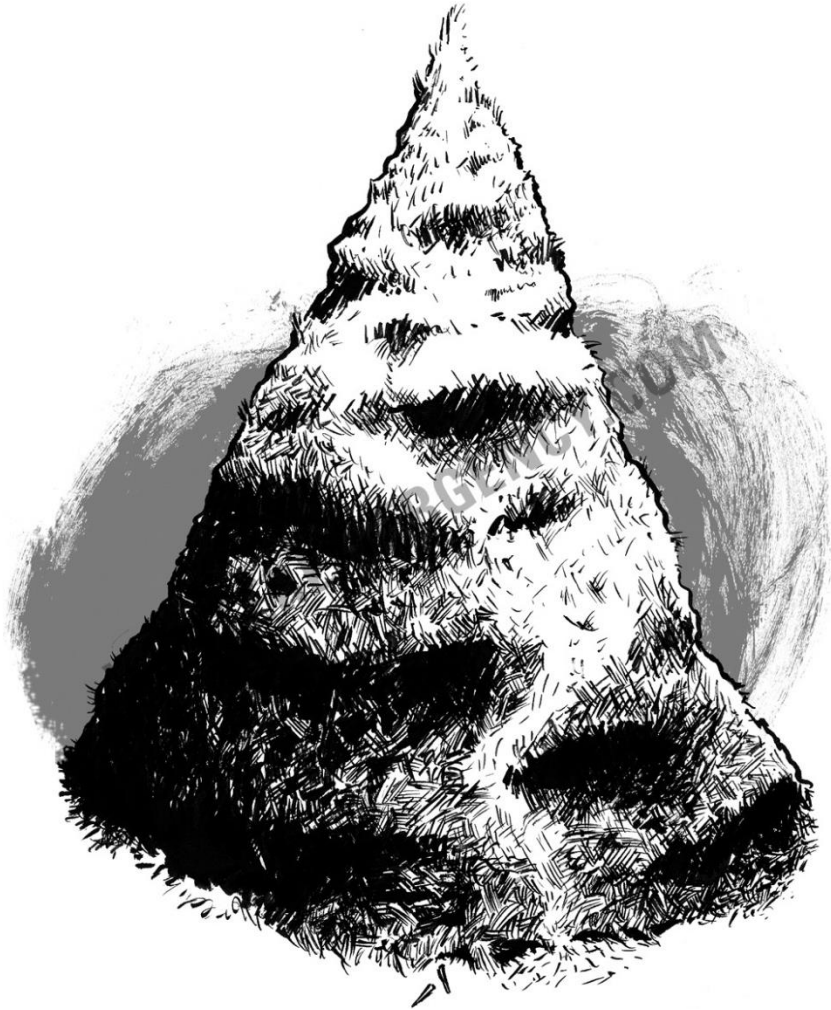
Looking at how your hero might respond to a major cataclysm — asteroid, plague, tsunami, robot uprising — can offer insights into her actions at more human-level jeopardy. So start blowing things up. Knock down some national monuments. Smash, crash and see what you get.

What's important to your hero? Who would she save? Where would she go? And once there, would she lead the resistance, or keep her head down?

How would a cataclysm change your hero's interaction with the antagonist? Would they still be on opposing sides?

Try this:

- A comet will smash into the Earth in 24 hours. What would your hero do?
- Imagine your story in a post-apocalyptic world. What would change? What might stay the same?
- What if your hero was the invader? Consider the story if he was the conqueror rather than the conquered.



Too much can be worse than too little. Overwhelm your hero with more than she can handle.

Whatever your hero needs, give him way too much of it. Give the detective six thousand clues. Give the sad sack forty dates.

How heroes handle success can be as illuminating as how they handle failure. Are they gracious? Vindictive? Can they make the transition from rebel to king?

Irony shines a spotlight on the struggle of life. You may be dying of thirst, but with a few bad decisions, you can drown in the desert.

Try this:

- List three things the hero needs or wants. For each, what might be the consequence of getting too much?
- An actual stack of needles is no match for a strong magnet. What are ways your hero could handle a sudden deluge?
- Consider jealousy. How would your hero react if other characters suddenly had their wishes fulfilled?



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If your hero died right now, what would happen next? Who would keep up the mission?

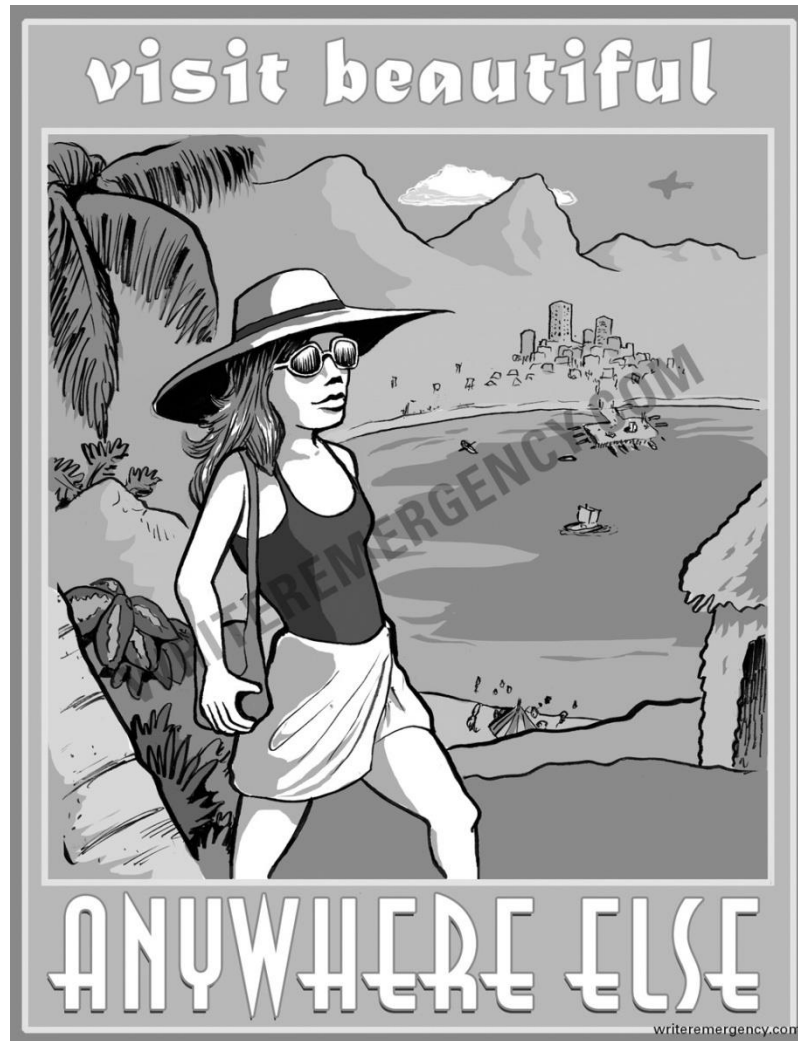
It's almost never a good idea to kill your hero in the middle of your story. But sometimes it's a *great* idea. Might this be one of those times?

If your hero died right now, who would take over her function? What would her opponent do next? What would her friends and family do? Imagining the hero dead is a great way to find out how indispensable she is.

Alternately, if everyone wrongly *believed* your hero was dead, what would she suddenly be free to do?

Try this:

- Write a eulogy for your hero from another character's point of view. Could that character say any of those things while the hero is alive?
- Jot down your character's last will and testament. Who would get her stuff? Would she want to be buried, and where? What would her tombstone read?
- Consider options short of literal death: prison, coma, exile, alien stasis. Anything that takes your hero out of action can work.



A change of scenery can do wonders. Take your hero somewhere new.

When your hero hits the road, her normal routines don't apply. She's interacting with new environments and new characters. She's literally out of her comfort zone, and that's almost always a good thing.

A new setting also gives you the chance to change the texture of your world, from weather to language to wardrobe. Take your Surfer to Australia. Take your Wookiee to Dagobah.

A new location should bring new challenges. Your hero is the same character, but without her usual routines.

Try this:

- List three reasons your hero might need to leave town right now.
- Brainstorm four settings that would be challenging for your hero to navigate.
- If your hero could call home, who would she call? What would she say?
- In the past, did your hero travel someplace particularly important to him? Is there a reason to go back now?



Your hero has stumbled upon a dark conspiracy — or perhaps he's been part of it all along.

Secret societies aren't just for thrillers. From Alcoholics Anonymous to Girl Scouts, every group has goals, rituals and inside knowledge.

Is your hero trying to get in — or get out?

Whether it's an ancient fraternity, a midnight bowling league, or that house down the street with the strange noises, secret societies provide your hero a chance to enter a hidden world, or escape a nightmare.

Try this:

- Who runs the group? Is your hero vying for leadership, or is he a threat in some other way?
- How do group members identify each other? List some gestures, clothing or other signals they might use. If your hero tried to fake it, what could go wrong?
- List rituals or practices that are special to the group.
- Is the group trying to expand, or remain exclusive? What might they do to protect their secrets?



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Deadlines force characters to make choices. How can it be now or never?

Time is the essence of urgency. Consider basketball. Anyone can make ten free-throws in an hour. Ten baskets in a minute — that's difficult. And you always want to make things difficult for your hero.

A ticking clock is rarely an actual clock. Instead, it's often phrased as "before" — before the bride says "I do" or before the Nazis cross that bridge. Heroes usually know they're on the clock, but sometimes it's more suspenseful when they don't. If the audience knows there is a ticking bomb under the restaurant table, every moment waiting for the check is terrifying.

Try this:

- From each major character's perspective, establish a deadline or ultimatum. Phrase it like this: If the hero doesn't do ____ by ____, then the consequence is ____.
- Heroes won't always beat the clock. Work through what might happen if they fail.



Up close, everything looks different. Zoom in to focus on a moment, a detail or an emotion.

When you look closely at a moment or idea, you discover truths and textures that might otherwise go unnoticed. (Chickens are basically velociraptors. Velcro is nothing but desperate, grabbing hands.)

Your hero may be holding the metaphorical magnifying glass — or perhaps he's the one being examined, each little action perceived differently than intended. Either way, lenses distort what we see.

A powerful lens can even focus light so intensely it burns.

Try this:

- What is your hero feeling right now? What are some tiny actions that might reveal it?
- Extend the moment. What if a given event took a day rather than a minute? What if it took a year?
- Imagine your hero is incredibly nearsighted. How would your story change if she could only see things an inch from her nose?



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Consider how your story might play out if it were in a completely different genre.

What would this be like as a western? Or a thriller? Or a comedy?

What would your hero do differently? What would the reader expect in this kind of story? Switching genres can help you brainstorm many possible plot turns, and alternate choices your hero could make.

Remember that characters often don't know what genre they're in. Characters in a horror movie may think they're in a comedy, and act that way until the chainsaws come out.

Try this:

- Pick a wildly different genre, and talk through your hero's plot if it were set in that world.
- Choose another time frame (e.g., Middle Ages, the 1970s) and reimagine your story taking place then. What would change? What would stay the same?
- Insert a hero from a different genre. Put a pirate in your romantic comedy. Bring a rowdy bachelor to your historical drama.



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Let your hero succeed through pure dumb luck. Just make sure the pendulum swings both ways.

There's nothing wrong with your hero catching a lucky break.

In both fiction and life, sometimes you're in the right place at the right time. It's often the premise — the meet-cute, the lottery ticket, the ordinary guy in an extraordinary situation. But mid-story luck only works if there really was a chance it could have gone badly.

So if you're flipping a coin, make sure it really has two sides, with real consequences. And let your villain get lucky, too.

Try this:

- Brainstorm three moments where events could go either way for your hero. What would the rewards or consequences be?
- Does your hero have any rituals or superstitions? If so, how can they be revealed in the story?
- Does your hero enjoy taking chances? Look for ways to challenge both the gambler and the scaredy-cat.



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The best heroes surprise us by taking actions we never saw coming.

Some heroes surprise us by taking bold actions. They bring guns to sword fights. They chase tanks on horseback. They cut the rope bridge. Imagine the stakes are life-or-death. How would your hero get that memo from a locked office if the building were collapsing? What would the condo co-op meeting be like if it were happening on a falling blimp? Don't let expectation box your hero in. Give him a whip, and let him start cracking.

Try this:

Who are your hero's Henry, Sallah and Marion? Brainstorm three relationships from your hero's past, and how they could impact your story.

Remember the poisoned dates. List four things in your hero's world that might be poisoned (literally or metaphorically). How might your hero discover it?

Find your Satipo. Is there an ally who can betray your hero?

Everyone has a snake. What is your hero's greatest phobia?

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Someone is not who he seems. Perhaps it's an ally — or maybe it's the hero.

Everyone wears masks, but some characters go much further, pretending to be someone they're not.

Some deceptions are spontaneous and unplanned (pretending to like jazz), while others require extensive training (a deep-cover spy). Some characters forget who they really are.

The life of an impostor is dangerous — every moment carries the risk of the ruse collapsing. What are the consequences of being discovered? Who gains from the lie being revealed?

Try this:

Imagine your hero's life is a deception. Who is he really, and why is he pretending to be this character?

List three jobs your hero would be terrible at, then write a scene in which she fakes her way through one of them.

It's easy to pretend to be someone else online. Brainstorm three ways your hero could be cat fished or otherwise deceived.



What would your hero do if confronted by a mindless, unstoppable horde?

"Zombies" don't have to be the walking dead. From soccer hooligans to snotty seniors to social media swarms, there are mobs in every genre. Unlike individual adversaries, crowds can't be confronted or reasoned with. Your hero may need to flee or take shelter — perhaps with other survivors.

Whether real or metaphorical, all zombies have weaknesses, and it's up to your hero to figure out what those are. Perhaps there's even a cure. But finding it won't be easy.

Try this:

Brainstorm some experts your hero could consult. If this happened before, how did they survive?

Does the horde have a leader? Is there any way your hero could take over that spot?

Make it personal. Let someone the hero loves join the mob.

Zombies want brains. What does your crowd want? If they got it, would they disperse or grow stronger?



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Take away the allies and support. Leave your hero to fend for himself.

If your hero can easily call for help, the stakes won't be very high. So take away her lifeline. No parents, no mentors, no 911.

Or set up the expectation that help is on the way, but then prevent it. Perhaps the reinforcements are stuck in a blizzard. The police show up at the wrong address. The replacement wedding dress is destroyed by ferrets.

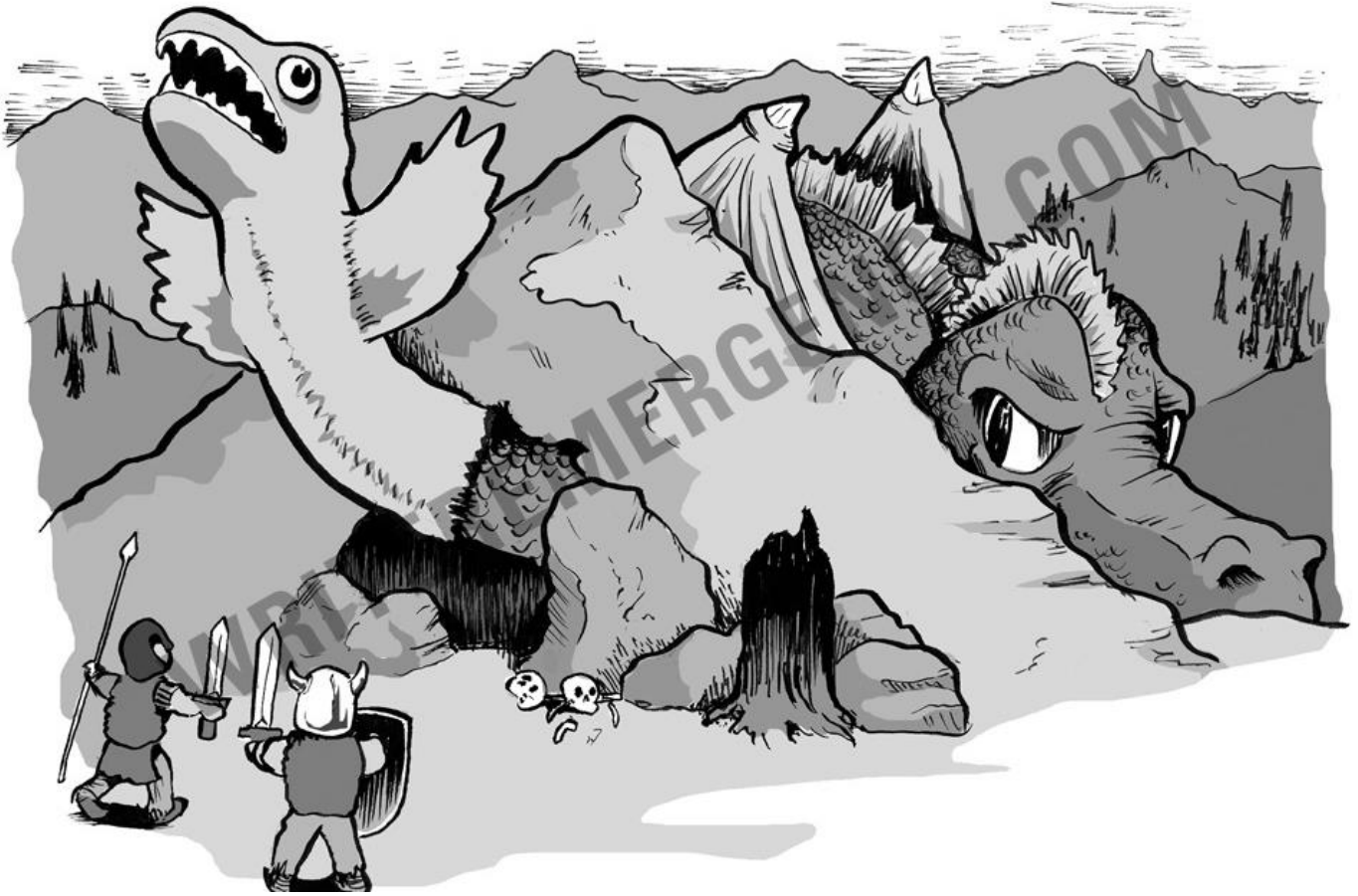
Force your hero to figure this out for herself.

Try this:

List three ways a person could get help in this situation, then list ways to prevent it.

Maybe your hero is the cavalry. How could she fail to come to the aid of an ally? What are the consequences?

Go ahead and send the cavalry — but at a cost. Perhaps the rescuers are worse than the original enemies.



You thought that was the enemy? Nope. The real danger lies ahead.

The best villains often hide behind henchmen and facades. Your hero might believe she has defeated the enemy, only to discover he's stronger than ever. Or perhaps, like *The Wizard of Oz*, there's a man pulling levers behind the curtain.

Look for reversals. Can the supposed enemy be turned into an ally? Has your hero been an unwitting tool of a greater evil? Was the whole thing a trap, or just a delay?

Even fake dragons have teeth. Let his bite count.

Try this:

Bait the trap. List three things that could be used to lure your hero to danger.

Picture the puppet master. Who could be pulling the strings? What would he gain by remaining hidden? How could your hero discover him?

Heroes can have puppets, too. Brainstorm deceptions your hero could use to confuse or delay the enemy.



You think it's better, but no, it's worse. Find ways to turn your hero's success against her.

From monkey paws to pet cemeteries, fables have taught us that gifts rarely come without a price. But this needn't play as a supernatural moral lesson; almost any improvement in the hero's life can backfire.

Look for ways to turn a character's achievements against him. The new love interest can become a stalker. The new house can be a deathtrap. The new job can literally be murder.

Try this:

List three things your hero wants. How could each of them lead to ruin?

Curses are hard to break, often requiring perilous journeys and exotic rituals. Brainstorm challenging ways for your hero to remove the affliction.

Some curses are blessings in disguise. List three ways a bad event could end up helping your hero.



There is no sanctuary. Things are deeply messed up, and have been for quite some time.

On the surface, everything seems normal. But look a little closer, and you realize this is an illusion.

Is your hero's ordinary life a lie? And if so, is she an unwitting dupe (the naive daughter) or complicit in the fabrication (the sleeper spy)?

What does "home" mean to your hero? Is it a sanctuary or a prison? Is it a location or a relationship? Most heroes are either running to or from home.

Try this:

Imagine one of your hero's allies is lying. What is the lie, and how could the hero discover it?

Empty houses burn faster. How can you destroy your hero's initial setting or situation, preventing him from returning?

Perhaps your hero finds a mid-story safe haven — a place (or relationship) of relative security. Brainstorm three dark secrets she could discover about it.

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