

Gaslighting and Writing Villains Who Make Your Spine Tingle¹

Writing villains can be a challenge, but one approach is having them use gaslighting techniques on their victims.

Gaslighting is a form of mental manipulation. It is an attempt to gain power over another person by causing them to question reality. When a person isn't sure what is real, they have no concept of the amount of control another person has over them. Gaslighting is a classic tactic used by abusers, cult leaders, narcissists, and dictators, and my cat if I may be so honest.

One of the most essential tools of gaslighting is the use of "illusory truth." The villain says something so many times that others come to believe it is so. The illusion becomes reality. When reality can be manipulated, so can the concepts of right and wrong. With those notions upended, any action or manner of behavior is acceptable. There are no crimes because the concept of law is debatable. The only thing that is certain is whatever the gaslighter deems to be true.

Yeah. Scary.

GASLIGHTER PERSONALITY

A gaslighter is generally an authoritarian with others but not necessarily with themselves. They, in fact, may follow no rules and become defensive when given boundaries. With others, however, there is little room for error. For those who cross them, there will be some sort of punishment. This will make others hesitant to cross them, which further reinforces their behavior. For them, this complete lack of repercussions brings euphoria as does the dependence of others afraid to contradict them.

They are either hot or cold, which further ensnares the target of their manipulation. Their coldness is so chilling that any amount of warmth is welcomed. In their mind, they are completely correct. There is nothing wrong with them. They are unlikely to go to therapy but if they do, anything the professional says will be discredited.

Make no mistake, despite their deplorable means, the gaslighter is well liked. They are charismatic. They are attractive. People want to be in their favor and liked by them. They are, in the truest sense of the word, charming in that they bewitch all those around them. Your reader should love them and hate the fact that they do.

¹ Excerpt from *Fight Write* by Carla Hoch, cited in article by Amy Jones. URL: <https://www.writersdigest.com/online-editor/gaslighting-and-writing-villains>; adapted by Joseph Sigalas

GASLIGHTING TACTICS

Okay, so how does all this look on the page? What do we do to show, not tell, that our villain is a gaslighter?

They tell flagrant lies. The character being gaslighted may even know it is a lie. But, because the gaslighter tells it with a straight face and such unfaltering conviction, the character being lied to questions their own judgment.

They deny having said something even when there is proof. Even when other characters know what they heard, saw, or read, the gaslighter sticks to their guns. That fact will make others wonder if they do in fact have it right.

They use what is important to the character as ammunition. If a character loves their job, the gaslighter will attack it or the character's connection to it. The gaslighter will tell the character they are not good at their job, they don't deserve that job, and that others feel the same.

They wear the character down over time. They throw in positive reinforcement to confuse the character. A gaslighter will make a character feel completely worthless then throw in, "But, I still like you." This will keep the character unbalanced and questioning whether the gaslighter is really so bad.

They thrive on confusion. Gaslighters know that your character functions best in a stable environment. When an environment becomes unstable, the character, like every normal human, will seek a sense of normalcy and steadiness. Gaslighters will position themselves to be that place of comfort where everything seems to be as it should.

They project. Whatever a gaslighter is, they will accuse the targeted character of being. Their persistency will make the target wonder if what the gaslighter says is actually true. If a gaslighter is obsessed with kitten posters, they will tell the gaslighted character that kitten posters are actually their obsession. The accusation will be made with such indefatigable tenacity that the target might end up buying a few kitten posters!

They amass troops. A gaslighter will align other characters against the targeted character—or so the character thinks. A gaslighter will make it seem as if others stand on their side against the targeted character. They will tell the character, "That's not what Bob thinks." In truth, Bob may have no clue what is going on. There may be no one standing in solidarity with the gaslighter. But because the gaslighter controls the reality of the target, they might as well have the whole world on their side.

And, it may be that the gaslighter actually does have people on their side. They are always manipulating others and that extends to people who aren't the target of their control. A gaslighter can manipulate others into being a part of their abuse.

They tell the target that the target is crazy. This is a biggie. The gaslighter will make the targeted character not only feel crazy but will make others believe the same about that character. So, when the target character questions the behavior of the gaslighter to others, they just look like a loon, which is what the gaslighter had said about them all along. Making the target character feel nuts is a tool of isolation, and isolation is essential to gaslighting. The more healthy contact a targeted character has with others, the more they will see the manipulation they are under. Plus, when the gaslighter tells the target character that their point of view is crazy, it dismisses the feelings of the target. This tactic further chips away at the target's sense of self.

They will say that everyone else is lying. The gaslighter will assure the target that their family and friends are not telling the truth and that the only source of truth is in fact ... just guess. Guess who the only real source of truth is? That's right, the gaslighter.

They will fight the accusation of gaslighting. When confronted with the truth of what they are doing, the gaslighter will come at the targeted character tooth and nail and do or say whatever necessary to tear down not only the accusation but the one making it.