

How to Write a Mystery



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I. Getting started: Write what you read

Basic elements & classic genres

- ▶ 1. character
 - ▶ 2. plot
 - ▶ 3. setting
 - ▶ 4. theme
 - ▶ 5. language
- a. mystery/thriller
 - b. science fiction/fantasy
 - c. romance
 - d. westerns
 - e. literature
- ▶ Which genres focus on which element?

Crime fiction genres & subgenres

Mysteries are puzzles



- ❖ Central story question: **WHO** did it?
- ❖ A fair play mystery
 - ❖ shows us all the clues as they are discovered
 - ❖ lets us meet all the suspects and hear their stories.
- ❖ The sleuth's job:
 - ❖ distinguish real clues from red herrings
 - ❖ separate liars from truth-tellers
 - ❖ interpret the clues & stories correctly.

Thrillers are roller coaster rides



- ❖ Central story question: **HOW** will the hero survive? **HOW** will she stop the bad guys in time to save the world?
- ❖ Reader usually knows more than the protag, thanks to scenes in villain's POV.
- ❖ Fast pace, high stakes, often international settings.

Cozy mysteries



- ❖ Sleuth is usually an amateur, but may be a peculiar sort of cop (Columbo, Monk).
- ❖ Sleuth works from character & motive. *Not* forensics.
- ❖ A small world: a village, a country house, the Orient Express.
- ❖ Little violence; no sex.
- ❖ Positive, sometimes humorous, tone.
- ❖ Villain is always caught.

Hardboiled PI, aka Noir

- ❖ Sleuth is a private investigator, or a bitter, isolated cop.
- ❖ Set in the urban jungle: cold & cruel.
- ❖ Tone is dark, but can be darkly humorous.
- ❖ The task is untangling hidden relationships.
- ❖ Violence is allowed; also sex, as long as it doesn't make anyone happy.
- ❖ Endings can be ambiguous.



Procedurals

- ❖ Experts solve the crime by doing their jobs.
- ❖ Lots of forensic detail. Readers love the expertise.



- ❖ Insight into the professional world of law enforcement.
- ❖ Mood can be sunny (Bones) or dark (CSI).
- ❖ Villains are caught and sent to prison.

Traditional mysteries

- ▶ Everything that doesn't fit under the other headings.
- ▶ Sleuth is usually a professional or closely allied with one.
- ▶ Often centered around a regional or ethnic subculture: Southern, Navajo, quilters...



The first 2 pages:

Make the promise to the reader

- ▶ Mood: dark or light, homey or exotic, philosophical, cynical, absurd...
- ▶ Pace: pulse-pounding or contemplative
- ▶ Setting: where are we and why do we care? Is the setting going to be a character?
- ▶ Main character: Get the protagonist on the stage as early as possible so we know who to root for.

II. Building the book

A. Characters

- ▶ How you cast your story depends on where it falls on the spectrum from dark to light.
- ▶ Dark tales have damaged heroes and femmes/hommes fatales.
- ▶ Comic tales have snappy dames/dudes) with good-looking neighbors who bake cupcakes.
- ▶ Settings come with sets of people.

Sleuths: Amateur or professional?

- ▶ Professionals:
 - Police persons, private investigators, lawyers, investigative journalists, pathologists, coroners...
 - Investigating crimes is their job, so you don't need to motivate them.
- ▶ Amateurs:
 - Anybody you like. Readers enjoy getting inside the lives of bakers, archaeologists, librarians...
 - You have to come up with excuses for them to investigate, at least for the first few books.

Sidekicks

- ❖ All sleuths have a Watson -- except for the noir P.I., who walks alone.
- ❖ Main job: give the detective someone to explain things to.
- ❖ Add comic relief or additional skills.
- ❖ Concoct misleading theories that focus attention on red herrings.
- ❖ Poirot's Hastings; Monk's assistants; Peter Whimsy's Bunter.

The Authorities

- ❖ How do you get the professionals (the cops, the bosses, the Feds...) out of the way so your amateur/isolated pro can solve the crime?
- ❖ Restrict their scope: they're either lazy, stupid, corrupt, or busy.
- ❖ Isolate your story: the hurricane hits the island.
- ❖ Go back to a time when there were no cops.

Villains

- ❖ Beware the all-powerful master criminal! These days, we like our bad guys to be real.
- ❖ Be sure your villain is a match for your protagonist in wit and skill.
- ❖ Fair play mysteries bring the villains on stage early and keep them in the action.
- ❖ The villain should be working behind the scenes to foil the protagonist – or at least monitor the investigation.

Victims

- ❖ In a cozy, it's someone we don't know well or care about much.
- ❖ In a noir, it's someone no one cares about.
- ❖ In a thriller, it's the highest-stake victim: a child, a helpless person, the whole world...
- ❖ The victim's life is usually the focus of the investigation, especially in traditional mysteries.
- ❖ You can't use motive to convict in court, but it's what readers care about the most!

Whose Point of View?

- ▶ 1st POV / close 3rd POV: we see & know only what the POV character sees & knows.
- ▶ Cozies are usually 1st.
- ▶ Noirs are often 1st.
- ▶ Traditional & procedurals usually 3rd.
- ▶ Thrillers often use multiple POVs, including the villains'. Thus the reader knows more than the protagonists: they see the bombs being planted!

B. Story structure: Acts & scenes

The 3 Act structure

1. Beginning ~ ¼.
 - Intro heroes & setting.
 - Drop the first body.
 - The detective takes the case and the game's afoot.
2. Middle ~ 1/2.
 - Investigation: the main plot.
 - Subplots: romance & other distractions.
3. End ~ ¼.
 - Climax - the confrontation with the villain.
 - Denouement.

Pacing your plot

Story is conflict: a protagonist wants something (to solve a murder) but something or someone is blocking that goal.

- ☛ Your goal is rising conflict.

The challenges get harder as the goals grow more important, until we reach the Moment of Truth, when our hero risks it all to win.

The big muddy middle

What do you do? Investigate!
Break the middle into theories of the crime.
Watch Law & Order to see how.

- ▶ Theory 1: pursue & discard, leaving one unanswered question...
- ▶ Theory 2: same as 1, but scarier and trickier.
- ▶ Theory 3: more risk, more difficulty, but this one leads to the killer & the climax.

Scene structure

The POV character starts the scene with a goal. The goal is obstructed. Does he/she succeed?
☛ *The answer is always NO, or Yes, but...*

Everything else is gravy: character development, exposition of an intriguing setting, forensic methods, small town shenanigans, that femme/homme fatale who keeps slithering into the story...

Block out your scene

- ▶ Setting: time, place, characters
- ▶ Purpose: why do you want this scene?
- ▶ Goal: what does the POV character want?
- ▶ Conflict: what's stopping him/her?
- ▶ Result: what changes during this scene?

- ▶ If there's no goal, conflict, or result: cut it.

Subplots

- ▶ Stories that are separate, but parallel, to the main investigation.
- ▶ Develop characters: protag's relationship with parent or boss, aspirations, atonements...
- ▶ Romantic interest.
- ▶ Comic relief: the sidekick's antics.
- ▶ Exposition: a bit of history or setting.
- ▶ Relate to the main plot through theme.
- ▶ Each one gets its own arc, like a main plot.
- ▶ Wrap up the subplots before the climax.

C. Clues and red herrings

"Clues emerge from the killer's mistakes."

--- Carolyn Wheat

Get a clue

- ❖ Fingerprints
- ❖ Fibers
- ❖ Wounds
- ❖ Witnesses (reliable and otherwise)
- ❖ Empty vials of cyanide
- ❖ Dogs that don't bark
- ❖ Broken watches
- ❖ Timetables & floorplans
- ❖ Scraps of letters clutched in the victim's hand

Alibis

- ❖ Every suspect has something to hide.
- ❖ Every character has their own goals.
- ❖ The sleuth must ask each one:
 - ❖ Where were you and what were you doing?
 - ❖ How do you relate to the victim?
 - ❖ How do you benefit from this death?
- ☞ Collecting and interpreting these stories is the central task of the sleuth in all but procedurals & thrillers.

Red herrings



- A false scent laid across the trail to confuse the investigation.
- ❖ Could be deliberately set up by the villain.
 - ❖ Could arise through simple coincidence: unrelated secrets and objectives.
 - ❖ The false theories could be considered red herrings: trails that lead to a dead end.

How to hide a clue: part I

- ❖ Reveal it before the crime is committed.
- ❖ Reveal it through an Unreliable Narrator: a liar, dolt, or prattler.
- ❖ Tell half-truths so that the reader thinks they got all of it. Let the sidekick make a list with gaps or the discussion be interrupted.
- ❖ Focus the reader's attention on a big shiny red herring.

How to hide a clue: part II

- ❖ Give a clue that the detective misinterprets.
- ❖ Let the Inspector dismiss the most important clue as irrelevant.
- ❖ Hide a clue in a character description (a pearl choker covering a scar.)
- ❖ Show the clue and immediately have something scary leap out at the sleuth; or let that femme/homme fatale start taking their clothes off. Distraction!

III. Where now?

Critique groups

- ▶ A good critique group will improve your writing enormously.
- ▶ A bad one can stop you from writing all together.
- ▶ Establish ground rules and stick to them. (Google "critique group etiquette.") Write those rules down!
- ▶ Violators must be asked to leave.
- ▶ Set a schedule and stick to it.

Book clubs

- ▶ Form a book club of writers with the goal of sharpening your writing skills.
- ▶ Don't read each others' work!
- ▶ Focus on craft. How well did the author handle the basic elements:
 - Plot
 - Character
 - Exposition of setting
 - Language

Go the library!

- ▶ Bickham, Jack M. (1993.) Scene & Structure. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books.
- ▶ Kernen, Robert. (1999.) Building Better Plots. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books.
- ▶ Snyder, Blake. (2005.) Save the Cat! Michael Wiese Productions.
- ▶ Wheat, Carolyn. (2003.) How to Write Killer Fiction. Palo Alto: Perseverance Press.
- ▶ Janice Hardy's Fiction University:
<http://blog.janicehardy.com/>
- ▶ Randy Ingermanson, Advanced Fiction Writing:
<http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/>