

Shhhhh... There's a Formula to Writing Mysteries¹

Have you ever read one of those stories that just keeps going on and on? Have you ever stopped reading at Chapter 7 and asked, "What's the point here?" Or when writing, have you ever felt lost? Not sure what should happen next? Well, using a formula helps keep mysteries on track.

"Formula" might sound like "cookie cutter writing" but it's not. It's about **meeting reader expectations of the genre**. If you're reading a romance, you expect the boy to meet the girl, the boy to lose the girl, then the boy gets the girl back. In mystery-suspense, readers expect that the investigator will investigate the crime, hit a wall, overcome that wall, and solve the crime. The formula simply charts the emotional high points to keep the story moving forward within the genre's expectations.

The following formula talks about crime mysteries, but it is easy to adapt for a ghost story or any kind of "mystery":



1. A crime is committed and a victim comes forward.

There simply must be a victim in a crime mystery. Often the story starts with the victim meeting his fate. But it doesn't have to. The crime can already have occurred before page one, and the story starts with the discovery and investigation.

I believe this to be the most important part of the story. The crime and discovery must be engaging enough to get the reader to turn the page. If the reader doesn't care, it really doesn't matter how impressive the investigation is or how dramatic the Big Reveal (see #8) turns out to be.

2. The investigator and witnesses identifies suspects.

Personally I like to have four suspects — one has a motive, the second has the means, and the third had the opportunity to commit the crime on that fateful night. Of course, the fourth — *the actual criminal* — had motive, means and opportunity.

To me, creating Suspects One, Two and Three is the fun part. I love developing odd characters that inhabited the victim's life. They have their own secrets to hide. They may lie to the investigator and mislead the reader. But don't take offense; that's their job.

3. Clues emerge.

To play fair, consider planting at least three genuine clues within the narrative that point to the true criminal. The investigator may not recognize them or understand their relevance until later. The reader may never notice them until the end. They can be subtle. And, obviously, you want several red herrings (or fake clues) that point fingers at Suspects One, Two and Three.

¹ Original by JC Gatlin, <http://jcgatlin.com/shhhhh-theres-a-formula-to-writing-a-murder-mystery/>; adapted by Joseph Sigalas



4. The Investigator identifies one of the suspects as the criminal.

At first, Suspect One, Two, or Three appears very, very guilty. The Investigator knows it. The reader feels it. Now at this point, the Investigator is trying to prove how and why. The case is all but wrapped up, except that...

5. The Investigator discovers that everything she thought is wrong.

The criminal is not who she first suspected. And she finds that she was blindsided by a “red herring”—that is, a mistake in the investigation that leads her off course. This red herring can be almost anything, such as identifying the wrong

motive for crime. Maybe the investigator has focused on financial gain (such as a life insurance policy), when the real motive (we learn later) is revenge (the victim cheated on a third grade spelling bee). Or it’s a crime of passion. Or self defense. Or an act of jealousy.

6. Everything seems lost. The Investigator is discredited. The Criminal is going to get away with it!

Everything is progressing just as the criminal planned (wha ha ha!). Whether professional or amateur, every investigator must hit rock bottom. Bring your Investigator to the breaking point, about to lose everything, and then push her down a deep, black hole from which, to your reader, there appears no way out.

7. A breakthrough arrives just before all is lost.

But the Investigator does make her way out of that hole, and she is stronger and more motivated than ever before. The solution doesn’t come easy, but there is a breakthrough. Maybe she missed something before. Maybe she looks at the clues differently. Maybe a lie is revealed. Maybe someone turns up who sends the story in a completely new direction. Somehow, the pieces add up, which leads to...

8. Revelation of the Criminal.

This is the BIG REVEAL SCENE, in which the investigator unmask the criminal and explains his motive, means, and opportunity. The reveal is the second most important scene in a mystery novel, and it has dual goals. The first is to explain every genuine clue and to expose the criminal’s identity. The second is more important: it must be climatic, dramatic, and satisfying.

Your ending must be memorable. This is why your reader stuck with you for all those pages. Don’t strike out here. It can taint the reader’s feelings of the entire story.

That’s it. Don’t look at following a formula as cheating or “writing by the numbers.” It more like using a jello mold, where you pour in your creativity and imagination to create a story that is exciting, surprising, fun, and entertaining—while still reading and “feeling” like a crime mystery.