

Some Secrets of Mystery Writing¹

More than any other kind of genre writing, mystery writing tends to follow standard rules. This is because readers of mysteries are looking for a particular experience. These readers are looking for the intellectual challenge of solving a crime before the detective does, and they want the pleasure of knowing that everything will come together in the end.

Of course, the best way to test the rules of mystery writing is to read many books in the genre. This way you can see how other writers use the rules, and how they're able to get away with breaking them. But before you attempt to break the rules, read the rules below and see how your work adheres to the rules, and how it deviates from them.

1. In Mystery Writing, Plot is Everything

Because readers are playing a kind of game when they read a detective novel, the [plot](#) has to come first, above all else. Make sure each plot point you write is plausible, and keep the action moving. Don't get bogged down in [backstory](#) scenarios or go off on tangents.



2. Introduce the Detective and the Culprit Early On

As the main [character](#), your detective must obviously appear early in the book. As for the culprit, your reader will feel cheated if the [antagonist](#), or villain, enters too late in the book to be thought of as a viable suspect.

3. Introduce the Crime in the First 3 Chapters

The crime and the ensuing questions are the hooks that will engage the reader. As with any fiction, you want to introduce these as soon as possible.

4. The Longer the Story, the More Serious the Crime Must Be

For many readers, only the mystery surrounding a murder justifies the effort of reading a whole novel, but other kinds of crime—even minor crimes, like cookie theft—are perfectly fine for shorter pieces.

¹ By Ginny Wiehardt / adapted by Joseph Sigalas

5. The Crime Should be Believable

While the details of the crime (i.e., how, where, why, and how the crime is discovered) are your main opportunities to introduce variety, make sure the crime is plausible. Your reader will feel cheated if the crime is not something that could actually take place.

6. The Detective Should Solve the Case Using Only Rational and Scientific Methods

Keep in mind this oath written by G.K. Chesterton for the [British Detection Club](#), "Do you promise that your detectives shall well and truly detect the crimes presented to them using those wits which it may please you to bestow on them and not placing reliance on nor making use of Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence, or Act of God?"

7. The Culprit Must be Capable of the Crime

It sounds like a no-brainer but keep in mind that your reader must believe your villain's motivation. And, the villain must be both physically and emotionally capable of the crime.

8. Don't try to Fool the Reader

Again, being implausible takes all the fun out of it. Don't use improbable disguises, twins, accidental solutions, or supernatural solutions. The detective should not commit the crime. All clues should be revealed to the reader as the detective finds them.

9. Do your Research

Mystery writer Margaret Murphy says, "Readers have to feel you know what you're talking about." Murphy has a good relationship with the police in her area and has spent time with the local police forensic team. Make sure you nail all the essential details.

10. Wait as Long as Possible to Reveal the Culprit

People are reading to find out, or figure out, the [whodunit](#). If you provide readers with the answer too early in the book, the reader will have no reason to continue reading.