



Writing Mysteries¹

Mysteries are fun to read and can be a lot of fun to write. But how do you do it?

Luckily, that's NOT a mystery.

By following a few rules, you can create a slow burning page-turner that keeps the reader guessing until the last section.

To do that, most writers use certain paradigm ("pair-a-dime"), or formula, to help keep their mysteries on track. That 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 something like this pattern: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back (it works the same way if you reverse the sexes, of course). This formula simply charts the emotional high points to keep the story moving forward within the genre's expectations.

In mystery-suspense, similarly, readers expect that the investigator will investigate a crime (or other mystery, such as what seems like ghost), hit multiple walls, climb over those walls, and find the answer. Sure, you can vary these formulas a little—that's part of the fun and challenge. But ignoring them will frustrate the reader, your audience, and may even cause them to stop reading.

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.

If you're writing a crime mystery, then there **MUST** be a crime. 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.

This part of the story is very important. 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 in the narrative that point to the true criminal. The investigator may not recognize them or understand their relevance until later. The

¹ Original by JC Gatlin; adapted by Joseph Sigalas

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.

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

At first, Suspect One, Two, or Three appears obviously 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 investigator finds that she has been chasing a so-called “**red herring**”—that is, a distraction or false bit of evidence that leads her off course. *Red herrings are an essential part of any mystery.* They can be almost anything, such as identifying the wrong motive for crime. For example, maybe the investigator at first focuses 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 jealousy.

6. Everything seems lost.

The Investigator is discredited. No way will she find the criminal now. Everything is progressing just as the criminal planned (bwa ha ha.). Every investigator must hit rock bottom. Bring the 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. Just before everything really is lost, a breakthrough arrives.

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 (the BIG REVEAL).

This is the BIG REVEAL SCENE, in which the investigator unmasks the criminal and explains his motive, means, and opportunity. The reveal is the second most important scene in a mystery story, 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’s more like using a Jello mold, where you pour in your creativity and originality to create a story that is exciting, surprising, fun, and entertaining—while still reading and “feeling” like a mystery.

Again, you DON'T have to write about a crime to create a mystery. Whatever you write, however, should adapt the formula above.

Elements of Mysteries²

Characters

- **Suspects** are characters who may have caused the problem the detective is trying to solve.
- **Detectives** or **investigators** try to solve the mystery.

Setting

The location where the mystery takes place (duh). These are often more fun if they're someplace interesting or exotic, but they don't have to be.

Plot

The plot is the story of the mystery. Usually there is one or more of the following:

- A problem or puzzle to solve
- Something missing
- A secret
- An unexplained event.

Clues

Clues are hints that help the detectives and reader solve the mystery. They can be things people say or do or objects that are found.

Suspense

Most mystery plots use **suspense**. This means that the reader does not know the solution while he or she is reading the mystery.

Distractions or “Red Herrings”

Distractions are things that lead an investigator (and the reader) off the path, including clues that do not add up to a solution but make the search longer.

Structure

Structure refers to the way the story is set up. Most mysteries have a structure like this:

- Introduction: learn about the problem, meet characters
- Body of story: someone is working to solve the mystery
- Conclusion: mystery is solved

² From http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson_images/lesson865/elements.pdf; adapted by Joseph Sigalas