

James Patterson's Tips and Tricks for Writing Bestselling Mystery Novelsⁱ

What Is Mystery Writing?

Mystery writing is a subgenre of fiction writing that relies on clues and suspense to captivate the reader.

If you're looking to write a great mystery that may become a gripping bestseller, James provides actionable writing advice, below.

1. Know Your Genre

Before you even getting started writing, it's important to really know your genre by reading as much of it as you can. James averages 50 books a year! He stresses the importance of knowing your genre well before you start writing. If you don't do your research, you risk writing something that's been done several times before. You might think it's great, and maybe it was great—15 years ago.

Instead, he says, do your reading and glean inspiration, then build on the story, modernize the setting, and breathe new life into a fresh plot with unique characters. Learn what's been done and then ask yourself "what's a new twist on this?"

Some of the writers who have written great mystery novels include Raymond Chandler, Sue Grafton, Agatha Christie, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Start with the classics (like *Sherlock Holmes*) then explore the genre according to your tastes.

2. Set Up Compelling Questions

If you're going to keep your readers along for the ride, you have to give them something to grip on to. Identify a handful of questions that pose an intriguing dilemma.

"One of the biggest secrets of suspense is setting up questions that the reader must have answered."

In *Step on a Crack*, which is the first in James's Michael Bennett series, the entire plot is built around a state funeral in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, which is being attended by important political figures. When the cathedral is held up during the funeral, the story is set in motion, thanks to a set of intriguing questions: who would do such a thing, and why?

3. Raise the Stakes. Then Raise Them Again

Another way to keep your reader intrigued and going along with you is to keep raising the stakes. First, set the foundation of the story with the hook. Then, add more details.

For example, in *Step on a Crack*, James gives the main character, Michael Bennett, a lot to deal with. He's a detective, working on this cathedral case. He has 10 adopted children. And his wife is dying.

In addition to the core mystery of the story, James wants readers of *Step on a Crack* to care about what's going to happen with his main character's wife and kids. How does he interact with them? How do they enrich his life? Why does he have 10 adopted kids in the first place?

These subplots are additionally raised stakes that keep the reader intrigued as the central plot moves along. And—SPOILER ALERT—that's not to say that the central plot doesn't have its own stakes, too! In *Step on a Crack*, the gunmen don't stop at holding up the Cathedral. They also kill and toss out the bodies of New York notables as the book advances.

4. Keep the Reader Guessing

When James feels a story is lagging, he builds in misdirections or red herrings. Don't be afraid of misdirections, he says, because they're actually very true to real life. Most detective work, amateur or otherwise, inevitably leads to some dead ends or wrong alleys. This, James says, is what makes a mystery novel interesting.

When you're creating red herrings, think about the future plot developments. Then, think of how to gently nudge your main character, and therefore your reader, in a different direction. Is there a clue you can drop that might seem revealing or important in the moment, but turn out to be just a red herring in the long run? Drop it, and keep writing with the confidence that a good clue—even if it turns out to be deliberate misdirection—will leave your reader enthralled and satisfied.

5. Maximize the Effect of the Reveal

The entirety of a mystery or suspense novel is leading up to the big reveal—but don't reveal everything all at once, or too quickly. Instead, create a scene that lets you slowly "milk" the reveal. James suggests feeding out little clue after little clue or tidbit until voila, the mystery is solved. It's not always easy to keep plotlines straight in your mind, so build out your outline by adding three or four bullet points of clues you can give your readers about how the book will end. Add these to existing chapters if you feel that they wouldn't spoil the surprise.

ⁱ Original: www.masterclass.com/articles/james-pattersons-tips-and-tricks-for-writing-best-selling-mystery-novels / revised for class by Joseph Sigalas