

MYSTERY STUDY FOR GRADES 2-3

Students create a mystery featuring their favorite children's detective character. A series of workshops focus on exploring the elements of mystery, looking at what is the same and what is different from mystery to mystery within the series, choosing a setting and mystery that make sense for the character, building the beginning, middle, and end of the mystery, and bringing the story to life with descriptive language and a mix of action, dialogue, and the character's inner thoughts.

There are 5 45-minute workshops:

What's In a Mystery?

Know Your Detective

Your Mystery Setting

Building Blocks of Mystery

Bringing Your Mystery to Life

Each workshop includes 1) specific exercises for building an original mystery, and 2) general exercises that reinforce writing skills related to that day's theme (exploring character, setting, story building, etc.).

WORKSHOP 1: WHAT'S IN A MYSTERY?

The study begins with exercises that help students to define what a mystery is, and to identify the essential elements of mysteries.

- * Make a list of fictional mystery series you know. How are they similar? How are they different? Write down as many similarities and differences as you can.
- * Using your list as a springboard, brainstorm the different elements of mystery: a crime or mysterious situation, a crime solver or “detective”, suspects, clues, conflicts, red-herrings, suspense, scary moments, surprises, a BIG moment in which the mystery is solved. The list can go on but should include these basic elements.
- * What words come to mind when you think about mysteries? Make a list of mystery vocabulary: spine-tingling, scary, suspicious, detective, sidekick, shivery, sneaky, secrets, investigation, spying, crimes, etc. There is no “right” list, just whatever comes to mind.

WORKSHOP 2: KNOW YOUR DETECTIVE

These exercises are designed to help students 1) to identify the qualities a good detective might have; 2) to get to know a given “detective” character more fully; and 3) to explore that character’s “voice.” Also included are general exercises that explore different ways of looking at and describing people.

- * Write down the names of kid detectives in mystery series you know. For each detective, make a list of character traits. What color hair and eyes does she have? Is she tall or short? What are her hobbies, favorite foods, special likes and dislikes? Does he have an incredible memory? Is he nosy? Persistent? Can’t resist a challenge? Won’t let a question (or a mystery) drop until he knows the answer? Always ready to look for a lost dog or help someone who’s in trouble? Does she have friends who help her solve mysteries? Any brothers or sisters? Pets? Special secrets?
- * Take a look at the lists. Are there similarities between the detectives? Differences? Use the lists as a springboard for brainstorming qualities a good detective should have.
- * Make a “word portrait” of your favorite fictional kid detective: Start by drawing a big circle. This represents the face of your detective, but instead of drawing in eyes, nose, ears, etc., make a portrait of words. On one side of the circle write what the character looks like. On the other side, write words that describe the inside, or personality, of the detective. On this side you could also include the detective’s “secret self,” things about the detective that nobody else really knows.
- * If your detective were an animal, which animal would she be? If she were a season, which season would she be? What landscape do you imagine your detective has inside of her?
- * Imagine that you are the kid detective you have chosen. Describe yourself (the detective) in the first-person “I.” Be sure to use your detective’s “voice” and describe both what you look like and your personality, your “outside” and “inside” selves.
- * Using your detective’s voice, describe a person, place, or thing you (the detective) really like. Again, it is important to think like your detective and not like yourself.
- * Using your detective’s voice, describe a person, place, or thing you really dislike.

WORKSHOP 3: YOUR MYSTERY SETTING

Written exercises on place can be almost like a meditation and can open up lots of story possibilities. These exercises encourage students to explore more fully the given setting of a series, to think of the kinds of stories that might take place there, and to keep mystery ideas believable and rooted in real-life possibilities. Exercises also focus on using the five senses to describe a setting as richly as possible.

* Describe your classroom (or wherever you are now) in as much detail as you can, including sizes, shapes, colors, smells, etc. Be sure to use as many of the senses as possible. If the whole class does this, it's fun to compare the different details that children notice.

* Think of another place you know well. This can be school, a soccer field, a martial arts center, a town, a ski resort or skating rink, a vacation house or summer camp, a dance studio, a veterinarian's office, anywhere. Describe the place, including lots of sense details.

* Make a list of settings used in the mystery series you have chosen. Can you come up with "rules" about the settings? Do all of the mysteries take place in the detective's home town? Does the detective travel to other places? Do the mysteries involve only people the detective knows already, or are new characters introduced from book to book? Are crimes committed, or are there mysterious situations that aren't criminal? Does the detective work alone, or with friends? Etc.

* Take an imaginary walk through your detective's town. Describe different places you know from reading books in the series, and try to include as many sense details as you can. Are there places in the town, or characters that live or work there, that you find particularly interesting? It is good (but not absolutely necessary) to find areas where your interests overlap those of your fictional detective. Your mystery will be more convincing if you write about something you know.

* Using the guidelines for your mystery series, and the list of places you find interesting, think of a setting for a mystery story *you* would like to write that features your favorite fictional detective. You might choose a setting from the list of places you find interesting, or someplace different. In either case, be sure the setting fits the "rules" for your series.

* Make a list of conflicts and mysteries from your own life. They must be conflicts and mysteries you, or someone you know, have personally experienced or encountered. (This helps students to come up with plausible options for the mystery they will write.)

* Now write down three possible crimes or mysterious situations that could logically take place in the mystery setting you have chosen. Be sure to ask yourself, Could that really happen? If the answer is no, think of something else. When you're done, choose the one you like best.

WORKSHOP 4: BUILDING BLOCKS OF MYSTERY

These exercises focus on structure: planning a beginning, middle, and end of the mystery, thinking about what happens next, building important mystery elements into the story, using clues to draw conclusions.

- * Take a comic from a newspaper or a comic book and white out the balloons. Make copies and have students write in their own dialogue to show what's happening. What do you think will happen next? Write it down.
- * Clip a photograph from a magazine or newspaper. Write a detailed description of what you think is happening, based on visual clues in the photo. Be very specific, and say which clues in the photo lead you to draw each conclusion.
- * Make a group mystery play, with the teacher acting as scribe. (This will allow students to focus on the structure of the story without getting bogged down in writing.) Before beginning, be sure to make a checklist of mystery elements to include: discovery of the crime or mysterious situation, clues, a suspect, investigation, a false lead (red herring), a big moment (climax) in which the detective puts 2 and 2 together, an end to the story in which the solution is explained. The mysterious situation should be fairly simple (Imani hung her favorite scarf from her hook in the closet this morning, but now it's gone) and can be chosen by the teacher ahead of time or by the class at the start of the exercise. The first person starts at the beginning and says how the crime or mysterious situation is first discovered. Then go around the room round-robin, with each person saying what happens next and how the mystery is investigated. The teacher will probably need to help keep students focused: Should our detective find a clue here? What do you think our detective should do next? Does that make sense? Don't forget, we have to build in a false lead. How might we do it? Where are we now--at the beginning, middle, or end?
- * You might also perform this exercise in two groups, if there are enough adult scribes on hand. Afterward, compare the two stories. This is a fun way to illustrate that there are many possibilities for any mystery story.
- * Now sit down with your own skeleton mystery idea and checklist of mystery elements. Divide a blank sheet of paper into 3 parts, for the beginning, middle, and end of your mystery. Write down what will happen in each part, being sure to include who is there, what happens, and any clues that are discovered. It's important to emphasize that it's okay to experiment and change things around. There is no one right way to create a mystery. Have fun with the story! This is an outline, not a finished mystery. It is the content, not the style, that is important here.
- * Trade outlines with a partner in the class. What do you like best about the outline? Is there anything that doesn't make sense?

WORKSHOP 5: BRINGING THE MYSTERY TO LIFE

These exercises encourage students to use language that evokes the five senses; to tell the story through action, dialogue, and the characters' inner thoughts; and to edit their work to make the writing more interesting. General exercises designed to reinforce strong writing skills may be performed as homework or in class before the session. These exercises prepare students for the specific exercises of writing their own mystery.

- * Take a notebook and station yourself somewhere: in the lunchroom, the bathroom, on the bus, in an office. Do your best to write down exactly what people say.
- * Rewrite the conversation to make it more interesting.
- * Take one of the conversations and extend it. Describe the place and the people. Tell *how* people said things, what they did with their hands, the expressions on their faces, their tone of voice.
- * Take one of the following “boring” sentences and make it interesting by adding words that make the action vivid:
 - The sun set.
 - The man looked suspicious.
 - I followed her to the store.
 - No one was home.
- * Write a description of an event you have witnessed as if you were a newspaper reporter telling about it. Be sure to include the five Ws: who, what, when, where, why.
- * Using a news photograph, try to describe vividly the thing caught in the action. Use words to describe movement that the photograph can't have.
- * Write the beginning of your mystery. Be sure to refer to your outline and make sure you are telling the story you have planned.
- * When you are done, edit your work. Ask yourself these questions:
 - Did I use the 5 Ws?
 - Did I tell the story with action, dialogue and the character's inner thoughts?
 - Could I use more vivid language to make the scary moments scarier, and the exciting moments more exciting?
 - Did I include things that aren't important and should be taken out?
 - Did I start each sentence with a capital letter?
 - Did I use quotation marks, commas, periods, and other punctuation properly?
- * Write and edit the middle of your mystery in the same way.
- * Write and edit the end of your mystery.
- * Publish!