

MYSTERY STUDY FOR GRADES 4-6

Students create a mystery story featuring a kid detective character of their own making. A series of workshops focus on exploring the elements of mystery, choosing a compelling setting, creating a detective, suspects, and plot elements that are “organic” to that setting, creating a structure for the mystery (beginning, middle, and end) that includes essential mystery elements, and bringing the story to life through the use of language that evokes the five senses, builds suspense, and combines action, dialogue, and the characters’ inner thoughts.

There are 6 45-minute workshops:

What’s In a Mystery?

Setting the Stage for Mystery

The Ultimate Crime Solver

Bare Bones of Mystery

Fleshing Out the Story

Bringing the 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 stories you know. They can be series or non-series mysteries. Discuss how the mysteries are similar or different.
- * 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 of 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: SETTING THE STAGE FOR MYSTERY

Creating a 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 familiar settings in different ways, using the five senses to create a rich and detailed "picture."

- * Describe your classroom (or wherever you are now) as fully and objectively as possible, using nothing but the facts: sizes, shapes, colors, smells, etc. Be sure to include as many of the senses as you can. If the whole class does this, it's fun to compare the different details that children notice.
- * Describe the place again, this time showing how you feel about it.
- * Imagine a place where a crime has been committed. (You can decide on the place and the crime.) Write an objective description, in the style of a police report, of the scene.
- * Refer to your list of already-existing mysteries from Workshop 1. Make a list of settings used in the mysteries. Chances are the list will be widely varied. The purpose of this exercise is to show that any setting can be great for a mystery, as long as you, the writer, are familiar with it and can fully visualize it.
- * Think of a 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 as completely as you can, including lots of sense details.
- * If time permits, the previous exercise can be completed with more than one setting. When you are done, choose the setting you think would be best for your mystery.
- * Describe your mystery setting again, making it seem scary and mysterious.
- * Describe your setting, really emphasizing one of the senses: smell, sound, sight, touch, taste.
- * Describe your setting at night and during the day.
- * Describe your setting from far away, and as you get closer.

WORKSHOP 3: THE ULTIMATE CRIME SOLVER

Creating Believable Mystery Characters

These exercises are designed to help students 1) to identify the qualities a good detective might have, and 2) to create a believable “detective” character and explore the character’s personality and “voice.” Also included are general exercises that explore different ways of looking at and describing people.

- * Describe in writing another person in the class. Don’t give the name, and don’t say anything that would hurt the person’s feelings. Read the descriptions aloud and guess who was the subject. The idea is to be as detailed and precise as possible.
- * Describe a person from the crown of the head down, or from the shoes up.
- * Make a list of fictional detectives from published mysteries. Are there similarities? Differences? Write them down.
- * Using your list as a springboard, brainstorm qualities and characteristics a good detective should have. Is he nosy? Persistent? Can’t resist a challenge? Won’t let a question (or a mystery) drop until he has the answer? Does he have an incredible memory? Notice things other people miss? Is he always ready to look for a lost dog or help someone who’s in trouble?
- * Now create your own detective character. What is his name? How old is he? What does he look like? Does he have any pets? Brothers or sisters? A best friend or group of friends? Is he shy? Nosy? Does he skateboard or have other special hobbies or interests? Are there things he is especially good at? Things that he is especially bad at, or afraid of? Favorite foods? Favorite movies, video games or TV shows? What makes him a good detective? Include any detail about the character you think is important.
- * Make a “word portrait” of your detective character: Start by drawing a big circle. This represents the face of your detective character, 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. 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 he be? What landscape would the detective have inside of him? Which season is he like?
- * Describe your detective’s bedroom. Be sure to include items that tell the reader something about her.
- * Describe the setting you created for your mystery in Workshop 2, but this time write from your detective’s point of view.
- * Make a word portrait of a character who doesn’t get along with your detective.

- * Make a word portrait of someone you know who's older than you.

- * What is a shady character? Experiment with this idea by having someone stand in front of the class and act suspiciously while the rest of the class describes her in writing. Encourage students to be detailed and specific. Is there something in her physical appearance that makes her seem suspicious? Does she have a suspicious way of moving, or shifting her eyes?

- * Take a walk through your school or neighborhood and make a list of different people and what they are doing. Be sure to include adults (custodians, people in the cafeteria, the gym teacher, the librarian, security guard) as well as students.

- * Now take an imaginary walk through your mystery setting. Make a list of neighborhood characters who might logically be found there.

- * Describe a monstrous "bad guy" character, using exaggeration. The idea here is to illustrate the value of exaggeration to show deep feeling, to emphasize an extraordinary moment, or for humor.

- * Write a police report describing the suspect in a crime as briefly and precisely as possible. (You can decide on the crime.)

WORKSHOP 4: THE BARE BONES OF MYSTERY

Creating a Skeleton Story

These exercises encourage students to think of plausible mystery scenarios for their chosen setting and detective character. By the end of the workshop they will have decided on a crime or mysterious situation, come up with a list of suspects and their possible motives, and decided who is the real culprit or (in cases where there is no crime) what is the solution to the mystery.

- * 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.)
- * Choose one conflict and write the story of what happened. Was the conflict resolved, or the mystery solved? If so, how? If the real-life conflict wasn't resolved, *imagine how it might have been resolved* and write that story.
- * Clip a photograph that shows two people in conflict (not a war, please--we are looking for something on a smaller, more personal scale). Imagine what the conflict is and write about it. Imagine how the conflict might be resolved and write that down, too.
- * 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.
- * Picture your mystery setting. Make a list of three possible crimes or mysterious situations that could logically take place there. For each scenario, ask yourself: Could that really happen? Is this interesting? If the answer to either question is no, think of something else.
- * Choose the mystery you like best and make up 3 suspects who might be responsible. If there is no crime, write three possible explanations for the mysterious situation. What is each suspect's possible motive for committing the crime? For each crime, decide which of your suspects really did it and why. (Or, if there's no crime, which solution to the mystery you like best.)
- * Think about how the crime or mysterious situation is discovered. Who discovers it? It could be your detective or someone else. If it is someone else, how does your detective get involved? Does he stumble onto the scene? Does someone else ask for his help?
- * Step into the shoes of your detective. What is the first thing that comes into your mind when you learn of the crime or mysterious situation? What do you say to yourself? What do you do? Call the police? Run away because you're afraid other people will think you did it? Scream? Freeze?

WORKSHOP 5: FLESHING OUT THE MYSTERY

These exercises focus of structure: planning the beginning, middle, and end of the mystery, thinking about what happens next, building important mystery elements into the story (clues, red herrings, investigation, action and suspense), using clues to draw conclusions, resolving the mystery and tying up loose ends.

- * Clip a photograph from a magazine or newspaper. Write in detail 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.
- * Write instructions for doing something that is illegal or breaks the rules.
- * Bring in a newspaper article about a crime. (Many local papers have a “police blotter” section. Choose something that isn’t too scary.) Have your class flesh out the story with details. What would they do to investigate the crime? Make up clues a detective might find at the scene of the crime. How might they follow up on the clues? Make a list of suspects who might logically have committed the crime. Think ahead and imagine how you (the detective) might outsmart and capture the crook.
- * Imagine that you are found by the police at the scene of a crime you did not commit. (What was the crime? Who was the victim? Why are you there? Do you know the victim?) What do you say as the police take you away? What are you thinking? How does it feel to be riding in a police car? How do the police treat you? Do they believe you are guilty?
- * Go back to the list of mysteries you made in Workshop 1. Think of clues that were used in those stories, and write them down. This exercise illustrates that there are many, many possible clues for any mystery. Clues can be objects, such as photographs, a fragment of clothing that got caught on a branch, or something that was dropped at the scene of the crime. A person’s handwriting, an overheard fragment of a conversation, or a note can be a clue. Catching a person in a lie can be a clue. The list of possibilities is endless.
- * Make a group mystery play, with the teacher acting as scribe. (This allows 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, suspects, clues, investigation, roadblocks or false leads (red herrings), suspenseful moments, a big moment (climax) when the detective puts 2 and 2 together, an end to the story in which the mystery is solved and loose ends tied up. The first person starts at the beginning and says what the mystery is and how the crime or mysterious situation is discovered. (Or the mystery can be decided ahead of time by the teacher.) Then go around the room round-robin, with each person saying what happens next. As you go along, the teacher will probably need to help keep students focused: Should we plant a clue here? What might we do here to help knot up the action? What do you think our detective should do with that clue? Where are we now--at the beginning, middle, or end? Does that make sense?

* Afterward, brainstorm other possible clues that might have been used. Brainstorm different roadblocks, or ways to knot up the action in the story. Or you might perform this exercise in two groups, if there are enough adult scribes on hand. Afterward, you can compare the two stories. This is another way to illustrate that there are many possibilities for any mystery story.

* 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 in this step.

* Trade outlines with a partner in the class. What do you like best about the outline? Is there anything that doesn't make sense? Are any clues too obvious?

WORKSHOP 6: 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 workshop. These exercises prepare students for the specific exercises of writing their own mystery.

- * Stand in front of the class and do something with your hands and then ask the class to describe the action. Ask for more precision: Which hand did I move? Where was it, at my waist or closer to my head? Did I wave the whole hand, or flutter just the fingers?
- * Take a notebook and station yourself somewhere: in the lunchroom, the bathroom, on the bus, next to 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. Set the scene, 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 a "boring" sentence 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.

- * Brainstorm a list of words that describe people moving. Encourage students to break down movement and describe it vividly and specifically.
- * 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.
- * 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 a scene between your detective and a suspect. Use actions, thoughts, and dialogue to show the tension between the characters.
- * Collect magazine pictures of 2 people in some kind of interaction and write the conversation they are having.
- * Write a conversation between two people in which one is trying to learn a secret from the other.

- * Write a conversation in which one character is thinking something very different from what he is saying.
- * Write the beginning of your mystery. Refer to your outline to 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?
- * Write and edit the middle of your mystery in the same way.
- * Write and edit the end of your mystery.
- * Publish!