



## Challenging Children With Mystery Stories

Curriculum Unit 89.04.06  
by Maureen Onofrio

Fifth-grade students love puzzles. Ten and eleven year olds are just beginning to leave the safe realm of the basal reader to branch out into sampling various reading categories. Therefore, the puzzle-like form of a mystery story should stimulate an appreciation and enjoyment of this genre. The mystery story can be an excellent stimulus for utilizing study skills needed to be a good critical reader, such as cause-and-effect, logical deduction, and assessing vital information and facts. These same skills are also valuable in forming a “budding” writer.

This Unit will be an on-going one through the year. First, students will read mystery stories, reporting on them in book reports and discussing them in class in teacher-directed lessons. In the discussions children will be led to discover the “main elements of a mystery”; defining a problem to be solved, looking for clues or evidence, assessing of evidence, and finally arriving at a solution.

In using the main elements to describe the mystery story’s format, the student can be shown how the problem-solving skills of sequencing, analyzing, cause and effect, and the use of logical deduction are used when reading and writing this genre. The final “poetic justice” endings give great satisfaction to a fifth-grader’s sense of “fair play” and innocence redeemed.

As pupils gain more critical-reading skills, they can advance to the reading of more mature stories by authors such as Phyllis Whitney and John Fitzgerald. He wrote The Great Brain series.

In the conclusion of the unit, students will do some creative short-story writing of their own using the mystery story format. In this way, they will have an appreciation for the skills needed to write a “truly good mystery” and, I hope, will have started a life-long love for reading.

For, as Howard Haycraft states in his introduction to *A Treasury of Great Mysteries*,

... people read mystery stories for a diversity of reasons. Some, for the intellectual challenge of the puzzles they present, others for the vicarious pleasure of the chase. Others believe ... that the vast popularity of the genre lies in the fact that, in a disorderly world, it represents one of the few fixed points of order and morality, where justice may be counted on to emerge triumphant.

This facet of the mystery story definitely appeals to a fifth-grader’s sense of fairness and emerging creative reasoning skills.

Lawrence Trent <sup>1</sup>, in his preface to the *Mystery Writer's Handbook*, states what a mystery story really should contain in its structure. He calls them the “rules of the classic mystery.”

Rule 1: There must be a crime and the reader must want to see its solution, his interest must be aroused and then he must long to see the mystery solved.

Rule 2: The criminal must appear reasonably early in the story. The villain must be evident for a goodly portion of the book.

Rule 3: The author must be honest and all clues must be made available to the reader. The reader must know everything the protagonist knows.

Rule 4: The detective must exert effort to catch the criminal and the criminal must exert effort to fool the detective and escape from him. Coincidence is taboo.

Although these are the devices of the mystery story, they are the hallmarks of all storytelling; the problem, the characters needed to make the reader care about them, the events that occur in their solving of the problem and, in the end, the reader feels a satisfaction in being included in the solution.

The structure of the mystery story lends itself well to teaching children how to write one. Many approaches may be used to introduce a child to mystery writing.

The first, and most important, is to begin *reading* them. Let a child discover the enjoyment of reading a good mystery story. Some of Phyllis Whitney's, Elizabeth Levy's and David Kherdion's can be used to stimulate discussions and invoke the child into becoming a “discerning” reader.

*The Shadow Nose* by Elizabeth Levy is a modern story, using an urban setting and basketball as background. The title is a pun taken from the old radio show, *The Shadow*, and his motto, “The Shadow Knows.” The main character is a boy named after the Shadow, Lamont Cranston. After reading it, the student could be guided to find the clues, asked to write when did you see the solution, and an opinion of the mystery's title.

For reluctant readers or those more interested in a comic book format, the Hergé series published by Magnet Press would be an interesting starter. Students could read the adventures of TinTin, which are beautifully illustrated in a comic book format.

The plot of a mystery story is most important, and many times the hardest part of the writing. Pauline Bloom <sup>2</sup> reminds us that good story structure demands that you not only involve your main character in trouble, but that you resist the temptation to have him work out his solution too promptly and too easily. In good fiction and in good mystery fiction particularly, the conflict must *grow*.

The process of writing a well-developed mystery then has to be step-by-step. This process is easily understood by young students, as this is how they have been learning so many of their skills up to this point. They can then very readily use this step-by-step process in their reporting of their reading. Who are the main characters? Where are they? What has happened? What is the mystery to be solved? How did they begin? Did you recognize any clues? Did an event surprise you?

When the time comes to introduce students to the writing process, the newspaper can be an excellent starting point.

Headlines could be cut out and the student asked to create a story using the facts needed to answer the 5 W's: who, where, when, what and why.

Richard Martin Stern <sup>3</sup>, in his essay on *Suspense*, writes that “suspense is the stuff of which all fiction is, or ought to be, made.” He adds that plot alone will not make the reader care, characters and suspense are needed. He calls the important words, “intention” and “anticipation”, the positive openings to the rise of suspense in the reader’s mind.

Time is a powerful tool in the producing of suspense. It helps build up to the climax of the story and is a device used in many stories to heighten the suspense.

Sequencing is another important factor in the building of suspense. It helps to walk the student through a recapping of the story’s time elements to see just when events occurred. You can guide the reader to see the building of the story, realize how the pace adds to the excitement and recognize how the author pulled him along to make him keep turning the page to read more. This, Stern feels, is the “essence”. This *is* suspense—the art of making the reader turn the page.

In planning the story structure, Charting and Clustering are two very useful tools. The student should be shown how important *planning* is before beginning to write. Charting, a skill which is easily followed by ten year olds, consists of charting out the main facts of the story in a paper.

## Charting

---

Title

Who What When Where Why

Students then see in an orderly fashion the parts of the whole. This can be done in analyzing a story or in the beginning of writing one’s own.

Another useful tool is “Clustering”. An oval shape is used to begin the forming of the important elements of a story. This, too, could be used after reading a mystery or before writing.

*(figure available in print form)*

In planning the story, the sequential details should be set down. Know your ending and how you will arrive there. The story nucleus comes from the “title”, then branches out into various parts.

In characterizations, students should be shown the importance of making them seem real. To a beginning writer, the use of characterization can be very frustrating. Reading mystery stories with identifiable characters such as the Great Brain series by John D. Fitzgerald may be helpful. The younger brother J.D. tells the stories about his older brother Tom who he feels has an astounding brain and is a boy genius.

Children may ask “What can I write about?” Some ways to spur ideas are:

- 1) Writing a title from which they create the story;
- 2) Naming a character e.g. “Lonesome Sue”. Have them write various scrapes the character gets

into;

- 3) Use a “setting”, e.g. a ball-park, a haunted house, etc.;
- 4) A gimmick like a picture;
- 5) A T.V. story or series;
- 6) A newspaper clipping;
- 7) A tragic happening—let them recreate the details.

Linking reading and writing is one very important way of creating a student’s “critical eye”. By first reading “good” writing, a student becomes more able to recreate “good” writing of his own. In creating the “design” of a mystery story with your pupils, you also introduce them to another facet of reading—reading for enjoyment. As Richard S. Prather <sup>4</sup> so aptly points out in his introduction to *An Eye For Justice* ,

“Enjoy. That’s the key word here” . . . Another reason for my pro-P.I. and pro-P.I. writer bias: These stories have heroes .”

This is an essential part of the mystery story to children—a hero. Someone fighting against the odds and coming out victorious. This hero appeals to their growing sense of individuality, a detective who triumphs in the end by using many of the skills they are just learning to use, the art of detecting and deducing a solution from the clues.

Howard Haycraft in his books *The Boys’ Book of Great Detective Stories*<sup>5</sup> , explains that he compiled these stories to give younger readers their own book of established classics of mysteries. In his second volume, which carries on with modern writers of a span of 25 years,—years which he calls the richest periods of detective fiction, and one he calls the “new style”—where detectives are “more natural, more plausible, and more closely related to real life”, he concentrates on stories that are “bona fide” detective stories. Each story has a central character who is an outstanding fictional sleuth.

He attributes the trend toward a “naturalistic” detective to Edmund Clerihow Bentley and his novel, *Trent’s Last Case* . Haycraft adds that this novel has been credited with changing the whole course of the detective story. His hero, the engaging amateur detective—who is an artist and journalist by profession—Philip Trent, is one with whom many young readers could relate.

Children identify with children they read about. This idea is stated well by Wallace Hildick in his book, *Children and Fiction* . He contends that the process of identification is basic to the whole writer-story-reader relationship. This is where the aspect of the “power” of a work of fiction is said to “take us out of ourselves”. Good stories do even much more; they widen our experience by cultivating our sympathies, giving them depth, and extending their range. He feels strongly that in helping children to begin writing, a teacher’s aim should be to, in his words, “derive the stimulating and strengthening of the speculative imagination and therefore of the individual’s capacity for human sympathy”.

Virginia Hamilton, an award winning author of children's books does this well in her story, *The House of Dies Drear*. Her hero, Thomas, is a thirteen year old black boy moving from the South to a town in Ohio, to a house which had ties in the past to the Underground Railroad for fugitive slaves. This is a book many black children could relate to and, in reading, discover many historical facts and insights into slavery written in an understanding and enlightening way.

Mystery writing lends itself well to the short story. With its tightly-structured format and basic elements, children can find a secure base for beginning to write in following the rules set up for a well-written mystery story.

Starting with the premise that even a child can be a detective, as shown in the Encyclopedia Brown, Nancy Drew, or Hardy Boys stories, a child can then write about such familiar events as a lost notebook, a stolen article, or a missing child.

Linking reading and writing is an important aspect of this unit. Exposing pupils to mystery stories of various themes and locales will give them the background, impetus, and stimulation to begin (and *enjoy*) writing one of their own. With the writing of a story will come an awareness of the need to use the thinking process skills used in reading and solving the mystery along with the author. Their writing then becomes one method by which these reading skills improve.

## Notes

---

1. Trent, Lawrence, *Mystery Writer's Handbook by the Mystery Writers of America*, (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1976) pp 3 & 4.
2. Ibid., pp. 44 & 45.
3. Stern, p. 137.
4. Randisi, Robert J., *An Eye For Justice* (Mysterious Press N.Y. 1988 ) pp 3 & 4.
5. Haycraft, Howard, *The Boys Book of Great Detective Stories*, (Harper & Brothers, N.Y., 1940) Introduction pp. 2-4.

## ***LESSON PLAN I—READING A MYSTERY***

---

### ***Objectives***

- 1) Introduce students to mystery genre
- 2) Foster appreciation of mystery story
- 3) Use evaluating skills:
  - a) Fact versus opinion
  - b) Relevant versus irrelevant
  - c) Drawing logical conclusions

### ***Activities***

- 1) Class discussion—Teacher directed What makes a mystery?  
Go over format of a good mystery story.
- 2) Students read a mystery story independently or Teacher reads a story to class.
- 3) Questions are distributed on handout to be answered after reading story.

### ***Follow-Up***

- 1) Class discussion—Sharing answers to questions and opinions of story.
- 2) A *Time Line* of important events in story could be set up.
- 3) Students could create own Book Jacket for story.
- 4) Class could listen to a tape of old radio mystery program.

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Author \_\_\_\_\_

1. The detective is \_\_\_\_\_
2. Write a short description of the detective \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is the mystery to be solved? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Write 3 clues given that you recognized. \_\_\_\_\_
5. Did you solve it before the conclusion?  
Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Did you enjoy the story? \_\_\_\_\_  
Why? \_\_\_\_\_

## ***LESSON PLAN II—BE A MYSTERY CRITIC***

---

### ***Objectives***

- 1) To recognize elements of a mystery story
- 2) Use evaluating skills:
  - a) Fact versus opinion
  - b) Inferencing
  - c) Drawing logical conclusions

### ***Activities***

- 1) Teacher reads review of a mystery story to class

- 2) Discussion on opinions of reviewer
- 3) Facts discussed versus opinions
- 4) Format of mystery story discussed
- 5) Students read own mystery independently or teacher reads story to class
- 6) Students guided to write own critique

### ***Follow-Up***

- 1) Class could have a “Critic’s Time” panel. Pupils could be encouraged to read own criticisms and discuss them with each other.
- 2) Criticisms could be taped.

## ***LESSON PLAN III — WRITING A MYSTERY STORY FROM A NEWSPAPER ARTICLE***

---

### ***Objectives***

- 1) Creating a story from newspaper facts
- 2) Comprehension skills to be utilized:
  - a) Sequencing
  - b) Fact versus opinion
  - c) Inferencing

### ***Activities***

- 1) Student chooses article from paper



- 2) Student creates characters to be used in story
- 3) Fill in answers to 5 W's: *Who?* , *What Happened?*, *Where?*, *When?* , *Why?* ?
- 4) Title the story
- 5) Write first draft—fictionalized account of events

### **Follow-Up**

- 1) Write final draft after corrections.
- 2) Share story with group, orally.
- 3) Tape stories on cassettes for other classes.
- 4) Draw illustrations for story.

## **TEACHER BIBLIOGRAPHY**

---

Costain, Thomas and Beecraft, John. *Stories to Remember Vol. I, More Stories To Remember Vol. II.* Carroll and Graf, Inc., New York, 1987.

Haycraft, Howard. *A Treasury of Great Mysteries Vol. I.* Simon and Shuster, New York, 1957.

Hildick, Wallace. *13 Types of Narrative* . Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., New York, 1970.

Hildick, Wallace. *Children and Fiction* . World Publishing Co., New York, 1970.

Keating, H.R.F. *Crime and Mystery ; The 100 Best Books.* Carroll and Graf, Inc., New York, 1987.

Plagemann, Bentz. *How To Write A Story* . Lothrop, Lee and Shepherd Co., New York, 1971.

Queen, Ellery. *20th Century Detective Stories* . World Publishing Co., Cleveland, New York, 1948.

Randisi, Robert, editor. *An Eye For Justice —The Third Private Eye Writers of America Anthology.* Mysterious Press, New York, 1988.

Trent, Lawrence, editor. *Mystery Writer's Handbook* . Writers Digest Books, 1976.

Wiener, Harvey S. *Any Child Can Write* . McGraw Hill Book Co., New York, 1978.

Winks, Robin. *Detective Fiction A Collection of Essays*. Countrymen Press, Woodstock, VT, 1980, 1988.

Zinsser, William. *Writing To Learn* . Harper and Row Publishers, New York, 1988.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY—CHILDREN’S BOOKS**

---

Buchwald, Art. *The Bollo Caper* . G.P. Putnam & Sons, New York, 1983.

Fitzgerald, John D. *The Great Brain* . Yearling Books, New York, 1967.

Fitzhugh, Louise. *Harriet The Spy* . Yearling Books, New York, 1964.

Gage, Wilson. *The Ghost of Five Owl Farm* . Archway Paperback, New York, 1966.

Hamilton, Virginia. *The House of Dies Drear* . Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., New York, 1968.

Haycraft, Howard. *The Boys 2nd Book of Great Detective Stories*. Harper and Brothers Publishers, New York, 1940.

Hergé. *The Adventures of TinTin* . U.S.A. Atlantic, Little Brown, Boston, 1953.

Kherdian, David. *The Mystery of the Diamonds in the Wood*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1983.

Levy, Elizabeth. *Running Out of Time* . Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1980.

Levy, Elizabeth. *The Shadow Nose* . William Morrow & Co., New York, 1983.

Manley, Sean and Lewis, Coco. *Mistresses of Mystery* . Lathrop, Lee and Shepherd Co., New York, 1973.

Terris, Susan. *Octopus Pie* . McGraw-Hill, Ryerson Ltd., Toronto, 1983.

Whitney, Phyllis. *Secret of the Samurai Sword* . New American Library, Inc., New York, 1958.

---

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>