



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1995 Volume I: Gender, Race, and Milieu in Detective Fiction

It's a Mystery to Me

Guide for Curriculum Unit 95.01.07
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Detective fiction provides a wealth of opportunities to improve reading and writing skills. Students come to the classroom with background information from books read in the elementary years, such as Encyclopedia Brown and Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys, and from detectives portrayed on television. At the upper middle school level, teachers can build upon this early exposure to the genre by introducing more sophisticated adult literature to their students.

This unit concentrates on writings from three different authors. The first selection is “The Murders in Rue Morgue” by Edgar Allan Poe, credited as being the first detective story. The vocabulary is difficult for middle-school students; therefore, the suggestion is that this story be read to the students in three sections. After reading a section, the teacher may want to stop at intervals to paraphrase. Students should use a journal to record the story’s events in their own words. The lesson plan for this reading requires the students to write a paragraph of opinion based on Poe’s choice of an exotic animal, rather than a human being, as the murderer in the story.

The second selection is “The Red-Headed League” by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. This is fairly easy reading. The accompanying lesson plan requires the students to write an expository paragraph. In writing this, they must return to the story to provide supporting details in their discussion.

The third selection is *And Then There Were None* by Agatha Christie. Unlike the other two readings, the solution to the mystery occurs without the benefit of detection by a specific main character. The lesson plan for this selection requires students to write a persuasive essay based on the moral and religious implications of the actions of one of the characters.

This unit also includes a broad overview of the genre and subgenre of detective fiction as an introduction to the detective story. It provides biographical notes on the three authors and a synopsis of each of the readings. Reproducible vocabulary sheets provide homework or classwork assignments. Finally, the unit concludes with a few suggestions for collaborative and cooperative activities.

(Recommended for English, grade 8)

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