



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1999 Volume IV: Detective Fiction: Its Use as Literature and as History

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## Teaching Reading Comprehension and Writing Skills with "Whodunits"

Curriculum Unit 99.04.02  
by Christine Elmore

### Background

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The detective story is a relatively modern invention being only about 150 years old. We can trace its origin to the great American writer-poet, Edgar Allan Poe, whose *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (published in 1841) is considered a classic in this genre. Jon L. Breen in *The Fine Art of Murder* argues that although there were numerous examples of 'prehistoric' detective fiction from both Europe and Asia, "it has been the handiest to start the detective story with Poe, since he created so many of the standard elements and devices of the form." (p.3) In his Auguste Dupin mysteries, Poe initiated the idea of taking the reader inside the mind of the detective who solved crimes through deductive reasoning. He also introduced the use of the locked-room mystery, the least suspected person as culprit and the eccentric amateur detective and his loyal sidekick.

According to Richard Alewyn in his essay included in *The Poetics of Murder*, the detective story really began its "triumphal procession" fifty years later with the advent of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes mysteries. In these stories the master detective was created and since that time "the fruitfulness of this genre has never dried up in spite of frequent prophecies of its death." (p. 63)

The detective story does follow a particular format and as one reads more such stories, one can begin to easily identify the familiar elements. Mystery writer P. D. James offers us a classic blueprint for the detective story. There is always a mysterious death at the heart of the story. A closed circle of suspects each has a believable motive, a reasonable opportunity to commit the crime and access to the means of committing it. Central to the story is the detective who uncovers the murderer by logical deduction from the facts which have been fairly presented to the reader. From this single blueprint hundreds of variations have sprung.

Why do detective stories continue to be so popular? H. R. F. Keating, editor of *Whodunit? A Guide to Crime, Suspense and Spy Fiction* suggests that it is because in these stories good triumphs and "in this way it adds subtly but on a large scale to the necessary quantum of optimism in the world." (p.18) Because the detective story possesses satisfying resolutions as well as fast-moving plots, it holds great appeal for readers of all ages. It challenges the reader to sort out clues, make judgments and arrive at conclusions in order to solve the mystery. Such high-interest stories have particular appeal for young readers and writers and, I believe, can serve to motivate even the most reluctant ones. Indeed, the mystery story is an ideal vehicle to encourage wide reading and to develop writing skills.

## Introduction

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I teach in a self-contained third-grade class in Lincoln-Bassett Community School where my students are primarily African-American. It is a typical homogeneous group of children with a range of reading abilities. With this in mind, the selection of children's books in this curriculum unit covers a range of easy, middle and difficult reading levels. These mysteries to a great extent follow the classic blueprint for a detective story except, of course, that the crime committed is not a murder but rather a robbery of some kind or some deception that the detective needs to get to the bottom of.

All the mystery stories that I have selected have detectives that solve the crime. To make the comparison and contrast of these young sleuths more interesting, I have deliberately chosen a variety of detective types. Some prefer to work solo while others depend on their 'Watson' to help them solve the mystery. Nate the Great is a young boy detective while Meg Mackintosh is a young girl detective. Sebastian, on the other hand, is a dog super sleuth whose human master is a police detective. The Bloodhound Gang is a trio of young detectives: Vikki (African-American), Ricardo (Hispanic) and Zach (Caucasian). This variety will provide a springboard for character comparison and contrast and will suggest the broad range of possibilities that my students can choose from when selecting and developing detective characters for their written stories.

This curriculum unit will cover a 3-4 month period during which a new children's mystery will be read every two weeks. This will allow ample time for the students to read and discuss the book, do extension activities, and explore related subjects. Children of similar reading ability will be put in groups of 4-5 and multiple copies of the book will be provided them. Thus, more than one mystery will be used at the same time but with different groups. I plan to immerse my young readers in detective stories and conduct small and large group discussion of the story elements. Students will be better able to write mystery stories of their own once they have been exposed to a variety of good children's mysteries.

## Objectives

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The objectives of this unit include:

- To develop a knowledge of terms used in detective stories.

- To preview each story and make predictions throughout the reading of the story.

- To develop reading comprehension skills through the use of oral and written retellings of the stories that are read.

- To keep a journal where you write down your predictions, list and analyze clues, suspects, motives and means, and propose solutions for the story being read.

- To identify, compare and contrast the story elements of the detective stories you are reading, including characters, setting and plot.

- To use a story map to analyze the story elements and to plan the writing of the detective story.

- To compare and contrast the young detectives in each story and generate a list of character traits that a good detective possesses.

- To use the SQ3R method (surveying, questioning, reading, reciting and reviewing) when reading nonfiction selections.

To use the knowledge gained in reading and analyzing a number of detective stories to write a mystery story of your own.

To participate in individual writing conferences as you write and revise your detective story.

## Strategies

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To encourage my young students to reflect on and talk about the mystery stories they are reading, I plan to use the following strategies suggested by Linda Hoyt in her book entitled *Revisit, Reflect, Retell*.

### **Oral Retelling**

Because there is a significant correspondence between oral language and reading comprehension, teachers need to encourage their students to talk about the stories they are reading. By conversing about what they have read, young readers can better reflect on the meaning of a given passage, measure their own understanding of what they have read, clarify their thoughts and, equally important, consider the perspectives that other readers in their group bring to the discussion.

The first strategy is called "V.I.P." (Very Important Points). As the students read the story (or the chapter) they are to mark points of interest or confusion with thin strips of sticky note paper. For our purposes, as we are reading mysteries, I would add the challenge of marking the clues as they find them in the story. At the post-reading session the students in the group would refer to the points they have marked and talk about why they marked them, comparing and clarifying ideas with the others. This strategy will aid them in reflecting on and summarizing what they have read.

A second activity that encourages young readers to reflect on their reading is entitled "Alphaboxes." In this strategy students select words from the text that represent important points in the story. They work in pairs as they gather these words and later insert them under the appropriate letter (A-Z) laid out on a form (worksheet or large chart). A discussion ensues in which readers talk about the selected words and their relation to the story.

To gain a better understanding of character development and, for our purposes, what attributes a good detective has, there are a number of strategies offered by Linda Hoyt. One of them is entitled "Evaluating Attributes." As a before-reading activity, the teacher will ask the students to list the attributes of a good detective and list them on chart paper. After reading the story, students will evaluate whether or not the

detective in the story possessed these traits and mark + or - next to each listed trait. A final charting of Nate the Great might look like this:

### The Good Detective's Checklist

Before Reading	After Reading
Takes notes	-
Watches carefully	+
Considers all clues	+
Is not afraid of danger	+
Doesn't give up easily	+
Works with a trusted partner	-

A second related activity entitled "My Character and Me" asks the students to select a character from the story and compare him/her to themselves. A Venn Diagram (two linking circles) could be used as they list and compare the similarities and differences in their traits, interests, and ways of doing things. A discussion about how they may have handled particular situations in the story differently could also take place.

Continuing our look at character development, a strategy called "Just Like" calls upon the students to extend their comparisons beyond themselves to other people. In this activity he/she considers the traits of a selected character. They consider whether a particular trait of the character is possessed by themselves, by someone they know or by another story character. Included in this activity could be a comparison of other detectives they have read about. A sample following this format might look like this:

### Nate The Great

1	2	3	4
Traits	Like Myself?	Like someone I know?	Like a story character I know?
Observant	+ my mom	Sebastian	
Curious	+ my baby brother	Meg	
Patient	- my teacher	The Fox	
			that ate the Ginger-bread Man

A final strategy under the heading of oral retelling is called the "Storytelling Glove" and involves the oral retelling of the story focusing on its main elements: characters, setting, problem, events, solution and theme. These elements can be written on a white garden glove and the wearer retells the story being sure to include all these points.

### Written retelling

Writing after and in response to reading increases a young reader's understanding of what he/she has read and helps develop his/her long-term memory. Similar to oral retells, they also serve as instructional and assessment tools. Both are essential components of an effective reading/writing program.

Interactive journals offer both the emergent and more fluent writer the opportunity to write or draw about what they think of a story they have read. Students work in pairs and after completing their entry they talk about it and then trade journals. On the following blank page they are to respond to their partner's work. This can take the form of sharing thoughts, adding new ideas or expressing a different opinion. Together they can

then talk about their responses.

A second written strategy entitled "My Character Says" helps young readers step into the shoes of a story character and take on their point of view. Again, this activity is done in pairs. One student begins by writing a question for his/her partner who has 'become' the story character to answer. He/she writes a response and back and forth they go writing, not talking, about the story's events as seen through the eyes of one of its characters.

A third strategy involves groups of three or four and is entitled "Pass Around Retells." In this activity a signal is given and each member of the group begins writing a retell of the story on his/her own paper. When the timer rings, the papers are passed to the right and each student reads what has been written so far and then continues the story's retelling from that point. This process continues until sufficient time has been given for complete retellings to be written.

## What Is A Mystery?

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We will begin our study of mysteries with a discussion of mysteries we have read or seen on TV or in the movies, comparing kinds of characters, settings, problems, clues and solutions. Together we will chart this information on large posterboard which will be displayed in the room for continuous reference. I will then introduce the following terms (see glossary at the end of this unit) to my class: deduction, evidence, red herring, sleuth, suspects, witness, interrogation, motive and clue. We will use these terms throughout our study of detective stories. From this general introduction to the world of mysteries we will move to the reading of particular detective stories.

With each story we will preview the story, look at the cover and illustrations and attempt to make predictions about the content and direction of the story. As we read the story aloud and discuss it in the small group, the students will keep a journal in which they will list and keep track of the clues given in each story, list possible suspects, their motives and means of committing the crime and offer their solutions to the mystery. At the end of each story, we will create a story map of the story where we will more closely examine the characters, problem, setting, main events leading up to the solution and solution itself.

There are two valuable sources, Deborah Jerome-Cohen's (editor) Investigating Mysteries and Patricia S. Morris and Margaret A. Berry's Mystery and Suspense from which I will select additional relevant extension activities that will reinforce critical thinking and reading comprehension skills.

Nate The Great Nate the Great, created by Marjorie Weinman Sharmat, is a junior detective, clever beyond his 7 or 8 years who has a weakness for pancakes. In his first case he insists on working alone but in subsequent cases his dog, Sludge, accompanies him. Nate leaves no stone unturned in his efforts to solve the mystery that his friends in the neighborhood call upon him to solve.

In Nate The Great, the first book of the series, Nate is asked by a friend down the street to try and find a painting she had done of her dog, Fang, which has disappeared. In this story for beginning readers Nate gathers his clues and is able to deduce not only how the painting disappeared but also who made it disappear.

An appropriate extension activity for this story entitled "Newspaper Article" is described in the previously mentioned Mystery and Suspense. Students are asked to gather the facts of the case answering the

questions: who, what, when, where, why and how. They imagine that they are reporters and write a newspaper article based on the crime in the story. Lesson Plan II (found at the end of this unit) explains this activity in more detail.

In *Nate the Great and the Phony Clue*, a clue meant to be a red herring actually leads Nate to the culprits, the writers of a mysterious invitation. His dog, Sludge, whose purpose seems to be one of providing moral support rather than of assisting in any significant way, accompanies him in his investigation. This story makes clear what a red herring is and how it can be used to foil a detective. Interestingly, although Nate is temporarily set off track by this false clue, a minute aspect of it (a single letter e) aids him in later solving this mystery.

In *Nate The Great Goes Undercover* our young sleuth has to work the night shift to try to find out who is raiding his neighbor, Oliver's, garbage can. The evidence is abundant but the list of possible suspects is also long including man and beast alike. Nate literally goes under cover, that is, under cover of a garbage can lid, to try to get to the bottom of the mystery. Since the culprit turns out to be his loyal canine companion, Sludge, it seems appropriate to ask the students in an extension activity to take Sludge's point of view and retell the story in narrative form describing what made him do what he did. They could then compare their retelling with the story told from Nate's point of view. Understanding point of view will increase in importance as my students begin the writing of their mystery stories.

### **Sebastian, Super Sleuth**

This series, written by Mary Blount Christian, is designed for the more advanced reader and has as its central figure Sebastian, a dog who helps solve the crimes that his master, police Detective John Quincy Jones, has been assigned. This canine sleuth, who often takes on clever disguises in which he is able to pass as a human, is relentless in his search for justice. He has the difficult task of working on the case often for long hours without the knowledge of his master who would greatly disapprove of his interference in 'police work.'

In *Sebastian and the Impossible Crime* a masterpiece has vanished from the museum where it was on display during a black-tie reception. What is particularly interesting in this mystery is that the disappearance occurred in a closed room with no means for the culprit to escape with the prize painting. Sebastian, as any good detective would, examines the motive, opportunity and means of a number of suspects and through a clever process of deduction is able to solve the mystery and uncover the painting.

This detective story lends itself very well to the "Mapping the Scene of the Crime" activity found in *Mystery and Suspense*. Students will draw the museum room in all of its described detail and position the guests as they were in the room at the time of the painting's disappearance. They will then offer their explanations as to how they think the painting could have been stolen and compare them with the actual sequence of events that occurs in the story.

Thus far, in two different mystery series, there has been a case of a missing painting: in *Nate the Great's* first case where he had to find Annie's stolen painting and in *Sebastian's* case at the museum. It would be interesting to make a detailed comparison of the two robberies. Morris and Berry, in their previously mentioned book, offer a chart in the activity entitled "More Than One" that students can use in their comparison. The following aspects, listed in separate columns of the chart, would include: what was the crime scene (time and place), what was stolen, how was it stolen, who were the thieves, who were the victims, and what was the reaction of on-lookers. Partners could work together gathering the information and charting it. A discussion of the similarities and differences could then take place.

A second Sebastian mystery, *Sebastian and the Baffling Bigfoot*, has Sebastian at his best travelling incognito in various disguises. He acts like a fawning pet in his master's presence but when left on his own, Sebastian is right back on the trail to uncover who or what is causing the commotion at Sasquatch Inn. Is there really a Bigfoot loose in the surrounding woods? The story ends leaving open the possibility that Bigfoot does exist.

This mystery provides a wonderful introduction to our exploration of Bigfoot. Carrie Carmichael offers a fascinating description of the Bigfoot phenomenon for young readers in her book, *Bigfoot: Man, Monster or Myth?* This type of reading of nonfiction provides a nice balance to all of our reading in this unit of detective fiction. A special study strategy called SQ3R will help my students read nonfiction selections. S stands for survey and involves previewing the title, headings and pictures to decide what the selection is about. At this stage a reader can also reflect on what he already knows about the subject. Q stands for questioning what you expect to learn from your reading. Readers are encouraged to turn the title and headings into questions to which they then seek answers. The three "R"s stand for reading the selection carefully, reciting or saying in your own words what each section is about, and reviewing what you read by answering your questions. My students will use this method to examine factual information and analyze it in order to form their own conclusions about the existence of Bigfoot. With this story students will be grouped in pairs and given a single subtopic to research. Marilyn Evans, in her book, *Guided Report Writing*, suggests beginning with subtopics which the students can focus on after reading the selection. In this case possible categories might include the Indian legend, eyewitness descriptions of Bigfoot, footprint sightings and Bigfoot captured on film. I would assign one subtopic to each pair of students and they would be responsible for reading, notetaking and writing a paragraph on this topic. Each pair will contribute their written paragraph to form a multi-paragraph report on Bigfoot which they will present to the class. Students will also have the opportunity to draw their versions of Bigfoot.

In *Sebastian and the Egyptian Connection* our super sleuth suspects that valuable Egyptian artifacts stolen from the Cairo museum are about to be smuggled into the city where he lives. Among his disguises in this case are that of a longshoreman and a newspaper reporter. We learn in this story how customs dogs are trained to sniff out packing grease for weapons. Sebastian discovers, however, that their noses have been rubbed with vanilla extract effectively hindering their ability to sniff out illegal imports of weapons. He is similarly suffering from a weakened sense of smell because of an earlier accident with turpentine. Despite this handicap he, as usual, is able to foil the criminal's efforts and plays a major role in his apprehension.

From this mystery we will move into a study of how dogs are used in police work. Charlotte Foltz Jones in her book, *Fingerprints and Talking Bones: How Real-life Crimes are Solved*, provides a very interesting section which we will read on heroic dogs who have protected their owners from criminals, dogs specially trained to sniff out drugs, explosives and evidence of arson, and search and rescue dogs. She describes how a dog is selected for such training and how it is trained. This subject is bound to be very appealing to my young readers and may serve to spur them on to do further research in this subject area.

### **Meg Mackintosh**

Meg Mackintosh is a young female detective about 9 or 10 years old who is very astute in her observations and careful to notice all details. This series is designed for the middle reader and its author, Lucinda Landon, by supplying clues both in the text and in the illustrations, challenges the reader to match wits with the young sleuth, Meg, and try to solve the mystery. Her brother, Peter, is often at her side during her investigations but it must be said that he more often provides a hindrance rather than a help to her solving of the case. In fact, in *The Case of the Missing Babe Ruth Baseball*, Peter throws out a red herring in an effort to foil her investigation and gain time in order to solve the mystery himself. In this mystery, unlike the others introduced



thus far, the reader must figure out how the crime was committed, since he/she has already been informed early in the story who committed it. Meg always writes everything down so readers will be asked to chart the clues in their journals as they read the story. Word puzzles, important clues written in secret codes, are also included in this mystery, providing a springboard for my young readers to practice writing messages of their own using a code system (alphabet codes or scrambled letter codes) as used in this story.

Meg, by providing her deductions regarding the clues she has gathered thus far, demonstrates the logical way generalizations can be made regarding a series of discovered clues. It provides a simple but clear introduction to the thought process. Let's take a closer look at how she does this. In this story Meg writes everything down in her detective notebook. She follows the four-step process of track, write, decode, and deduce to arrive at the solution to the mystery. Meg considers the clues that Alice had left in various hiding places. She lists her three deductions in her notebook: 1) All clues have to do with Mother Goose Rhymes; 2) All clues are hidden in this house; 3) Clues can only be found in old things because Alice hid them long ago. Based on these deductions, Meg reconsiders the last clue she has found, "the little dog laughed." It leads her to her grandpa's old toy dog. Noticing a loose thread, Meg pulls it and finds the long lost Babe Ruth baseball tucked inside the stuffed animal.

In a second mystery, *The Mystery of the Soccer Match*, Meg, in her typically organized way, shows the reader how she organizes her notes in the case, grouping her information under three headings: suspects, motives and clues. The reader is invited to formulate his/her own deductions regarding this information. In this mystery two different people, Heather and Alex, confess to taking a gold medal at different times. An appropriate activity taken from *Mystery and Suspense* is the "Mea Culpa Letter" where students step into the shoes of the culprits and from their point of view write a letter confessing their crime and telling why they had done it. Lesson Plan I describes this activity in more detail.

In *The Case of the Curious Whale Watch* Meg searches for a treasure map that has disappeared while she is on a cruise with a closed circle of suspects all with a motive, opportunity and means. One of the illustrations in this story is Meg's attempt to map out the scene of the crime and it invites readers to analyze information and see if their conclusions match with hers. As this mystery takes place on the sea, it would seem very appropriate for my students to next explore the real-life mystery of the Bermuda Triangle. Hazel Brown's and Brian Cambourne's *Read and Retell* offers a brief and simplified description of this mystery to which students would be asked to read and discuss. A second mystery to explore whose setting is in the water is that of the Loch Ness monster. Sally Berke, in her book for young readers entitled, *Monster at Loch Ness*, discusses the legends and the evidence regarding the origins and existence of the Loch Ness Monster. Copying the approach used in studying Bigfoot, my students will familiarize themselves with this mystery.

### **The Bloodhound Gang**

Vikki, Ricardo and Zach are three young detectives in Sid Fleischman's mysteries who make up the Bloodhound Gang. They put their heads together to solve the mysteries and are a very efficient team. These stories fall into the middle level of reading difficulty.

In *The Case of Princess Tomorrow* the Bloodhound Gang set out to prove that the princess's uncanny ability to predict the future while under hypnosis is actually a hoax. Something about the way Professor Diabolo oversoaked the stamp before putting it on the envelope bothered Vikki. Later she is to discover that his intention was to make sure the stamp didn't stick for long, thus causing the letter never to reach its destination. Another question bothered the dynamic trio. Why was the name of the racehorse that Princess Tomorrow predicted would win misspelled? They were to discover that it was because she had copied it from



the late-afternoon newspaper account of the race results, the original source of the error. These two clues would later lead to the downfall of those two partners in crime. The reader is invited to track the clues along with our trio and make predictions about what Professor Diabolo and his princess are really up to.

"Track That Clue" activity found in the previously mentioned Investigating Mysteries offers my students a handy flowchart of boxes and arrows which they can use to show the direction and cause-and-effect nature of the clues given in this story. In addition, we will take a closer look at hypnosis and its validity as a crime-solving tool. We will begin by reading the section on hypnosis in *Jone's Fingerprints and Talking Bones*.

In *The Case of the Cackling Ghost* our gang is hired by Mrs. Fairbanks to establish whether there is a ghost regularly haunting her premises. Her nephew, Edmund, insists that she is going mad and that she is suffering from the curse of the Darjeeling Necklace. The only cure is for her to get rid of this priceless piece of jewelry and he offers to take charge of it. With keen observation and fearless pursuit, the Bloodhound Gang slowly unravel Edmund's deceptive plan.

Appropriate to this story would be a discussion of the advantages a trio of sleuths have over the detective who works solo. Numerous instances can be found in these two stories of how one member further acts on the hunches of another or picks up clues unnoticed by another and how each member assigns himself to different suspects who they watch carefully and regularly report on. It is through their joint efforts that the crimes are satisfactorily resolved. A lively discussion and comparison of the junior detectives we have read about can now take place. After listing and analyzing their similarities and differences, we will discuss the traits that a good detective possesses. Such an exercise is an ideal springboard for writing our own detective stories.

## Writing a Detective Story

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After reading our mystery stories, reviewing plots and analyzing story elements and characters, we will be able to begin planning the writing of our own mysteries. We will follow the writing process of brainstorming, mapping out ideas, and writing beginning and final drafts. Our final "published" mystery stories will later be shared with the larger group.

In the brainstorming stage, I will encourage my students to consider possible settings, kinds of characters, the time period the story will take place in, and the type of crime or problem needing to be solved. Ideas may take the form of lists, sketches or webbing.

To help them plan their characters (and they may well wish to pattern them after sleuths in the stories we have read) I will suggest they create "character cards" on which they sketch the character on one side of each index card and list on the other side such aspects as personality traits, likes and dislikes, weaknesses, and special abilities. Lesson Plan III describes this activity in greater detail. H. R. F. Keating, in his book, *Writing Crime Fiction*, advises the writer early on to name his characters as a way of "thickening them up." Think of a name, he suggests, that subtly says something about the person and attach one typical trait to each character perhaps exaggerating it so that the reader will make associations with that character in subsequent references to him or her in the story. Go on, Keating says, to determine their ages and some other broad details about them. (p. 68).

Models of good writing will help my young writers to more fully develop their descriptions. Julian Symons, in his book, *Great Detectives: Seven Original Investigations*, provides excellent descriptions of characters and setting from which I plan to take samples to show my students. Hazel Brown's and Brian Cambourne's previously mentioned book, *Read and Retell*, offers a selection of readings that demonstrates how the power of description can be used to develop atmosphere, setting and character which I plan to have my students read and imitate.

As they develop setting of their story, I will ask them to sketch a picture of the setting, make a list of adjectives that describe this place, use a graphic organizer on which they list what sounds, sights, smells and tastes would be found there and to think about the role that the setting will play in their story.

Regarding point of view, I will suggest and provide three types of models for my students: 1) the first person point of view in which the detective tells the story in his or her words; 2) talking to a partner point of view where the detective has a 'Watson' in whom he confides and in this way the reader is regularly informed of what the detective is thinking; 3) "the angel over the shoulder point of view" (Keating, p. 8) where the writer tells the story as if he is positioned just behind and above the detective. Not only does the reader know what the detective sees and hears, but he actually can enter his head when the writer wants him to.

As my students map out the plot, I will suggest a model that requires them to start backwards: first, plan how the problem or crime will be solved and by whom and secondly, plan how the story will begin. Then they can begin the process of mapping out the clues in the order they will be given in the story, including, of course, any false clues. As my young students work to revise and develop their stories, they will be encouraged to read their drafts to small groups of classmates who may be able to offer suggestions for improving their mysteries. I will also be holding periodic conferences with them to guide them in their story writing.

As a result of this curriculum unit, my students will learn to polish their reading comprehension and writing skills while enjoying this most attractive and stimulating genre of writing.

## Glossary

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alibi - The suspect's claim that he or she was not near the scene of the crime when it took place.

clue - Something that leads or appears to lead the detective closer to solving the crime.

deduction - Logically using the facts to arrive at a conclusion.

evidence - Proof of who the villain is.

interrogation - Questioning by the detective of all the suspects in the case.

red herring - A false clue intended to throw the detective off the track.

sleuth - Someone who investigates and solves a crime.

suspects - The people who are connected to the crime in some way and seem to have a reason for committing it.

witness - A person who discovers a crime or has information about the crime.

## Lesson Plan I

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Objective: To retell an event through the eyes of a story character explaining his/her motive for committing the crime and how he/she felt after being caught.

Materials: Notebook paper, pencil, large chart paper, Meg Mackintosh and The Mystery at the Soccer Match (or any suitable mystery story).

Procedure:

1. Begin with a discussion summarizing the story's end when Meg announced who had stolen the gold medal. Refer to pages 43-48.
2. Extend the discussion by exploring the reasons why both Heather and Alex stole the medal at different times during the game.
3. Ask for volunteers who will role-play being Heather and Alex and have the rest of the group ask them questions to further probe why they committed the crime and how they feel now that they've been caught. Sample questions might include:

Why did you steal the gold medal in the first place?

What did you plan to do with the medal?

Did you think of the effect it would have on the rest of the kids?

Have you ever stolen before?

How did you feel when you first stole it? And now?

What do you think your punishment should be?

4. Prepare for the writing activity by first reviewing the form of a friendly letter and its five main parts: heading, greeting, body, closing and signature.

5. Tell the students that they are going to pretend that they are either Heather or Alex and write a letter to his/her family explaining in detail why he/she committed the crime and describe what his/her feelings are now that he/she has been caught. On chart paper, model the writing of the following letter before they begin. Introduce it by saying that this is a Mea Culpa letter from the infamous Goldilocks to her parents. Discuss its components and ask them about the crime Goldilocks committed and how she seemed to feel about it after getting caught.

234 Cherry Hill Lane  
Caseville, MI  
July 6, 1999

Dear Mom and Dad,

I'm writing you to tell you why I broke into the three bears' house. I'm sort of sorry I did it, but I really didn't think it was that big of a deal. I was feeling so bored at home (You never let me go out with my friends) so I decided to take a walk and get some fresh air. I walked for a long time and I got so hungry. Believe me. I would have eaten anything at that point, even your zucchini stew, Mom. Anyway, I saw the door of the bears' house ajar so I just walked right in. I figured if they didn't want anyone coming in, they would have locked the door. I admit I was too rough with the baby chair and yes, I probably shouldn't have eaten all that porridge up but it was just right. Well, who could blame me for wanting to take a little nap after that? Baby bear's bed was so comfortable. Boy, when I woke up and saw three furry faces staring at me, I tore out of there and would have run all the way home but Ranger Dan caught me as I left the house. I really don't know what real harm I did. I was just curious. You're not going to ground me for that, are you?

Your daughter,

Goldilocks

6. Allow students sufficient time to write their letters and then conference with them to help them upgrade the first drafts.
7. Have individuals read their final draft letters aloud to the group who can respond to their writing.
8. An extension activity for this lesson would be having each family member to whom the letter was addressed react to the letter. This could take the form of role-playing.

--Adapted from an activity entitled "Mea Culpa" found in Morris and Berry's *Mystery and Suspense*, page 36.

## Lesson Plan II

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Objective: To gather the main facts of the mystery story and, as a reporter, write a newspaper article that is based on the crime that took place in the story.

Materials: Notebook paper, pencil, a newspaper, any mystery book.

Procedure:

1. Begin with a discussion of where newspaper reporters get their information for the articles they write. Discuss how important it is that he/she gets all the facts right so that the article informs rather than misinforms the reader. Examine some short newspaper articles perhaps of some local events and have students pick out the facts of who what, where, when, why and how.

2. Introduce the five W questions plus the H question and discuss the direction each question takes.

Who - the people involved

What - the event itself that took place

When - the time of day, year

Where - the place where it occurred

Why - the reason it happened

How - the way it took place; the effect it had

3. Ask students to list and space each of these five questions on notebook paper and revisit the book in order to gather the facts of the crime. These facts can be written in note form (words and phrases).

4. After gathering all necessary facts, students are to compare notes with a partner to see if anything significant has been left out.

5. Students are then to write an article in paragraph form describing the crime that took place in all its detail.

6. The teacher will confer with each student to check that all the facts are included and are written in sentence form. Ask students to create a snappy title for their article typical of newspaper articles. Students could first examine some headlines of articles in a newspaper noting syntax and choice of words.

7. Students could then type out their final draft articles which could be displayed in a newspaper format for the rest of the class to read.

## Lesson Plan III

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Objective: To develop character traits for each important character in the mystery story that you are composing.

Materials: 3 x 5 index cards, pencils, notebook paper, Nate the Great (or any mystery story that would lend itself well to this activity)

Procedure:

1. Begin with a discussion about how a writer describes his/her characters by telling us about what each one likes and dislikes, how they act, the way they talk, how they dress and things they've done in the past.
2. Have the students examine the following statements about Nate (the junior detective) and discuss what they tell about him.

Statement      Quality

I have found lost balloons, books, slippers, chickens. Even a lost goldfish. Now, I, Nate the Great will find a lost picture.

(page 10)      Confident,  
Experienced

I put on my detective suit. I took my notebook and pencil. I

left a note for my mother. I always leave a note for my mother

when I am on a case. (page 12)      Thoughtful,  
Prepared,  
Responsible

Fang was there. He was big, all right. And he had big teeth.

He showed them to me. I showed him mine. He sniffed

me. I sniffed him back. (page 25-26)      Fearless

Come. We will dig in the yard. Annie and I dug for two hours. (page 30)      Persistent

Big Hex jumped on my lap. I did not like Big Hex. Big Hex did not like me. (page 39-40)

Is not crazy about cats.

"The case is solved," I said. "I must go." "I don't know how

to thank you," Annie said. "I do," I said. "Are there any

pancakes left?" (page 60)

Has a weakness

for pancakes

3. Ask the students to think about what their main character, the detective, might look like. Have them begin with a pencil sketch of him/her on the blank side of the index card.

4. On notebook paper, have the students write some adjectives that describe the kind of person he/she is. Students are then to write one or two sentences about the character for each of the listed adjectives. Instruct them to show the quality and not use the adjective itself in the statements. For example:

Adjective: very serious while on the job.

Statements: I, Nate the Great, did not laugh. I was on a case. I had a job to do. (page 49)

5. Have students read their finished sentences to a partner asking him/her to listen and then describe what the characters seems to be like (based on the statements they have heard).

6. Further refinement of the character will lead to naming him/her and listing such aspects as age, likes and dislikes, hobbies, fears, weaknesses, scars or noticeable marks, etc. which can be written on the lined portion of the index card.

7. Students will follow this same process to develop other important characters in their story.

--Adapted from an activity entitled "Developing Characters" found in Deborah Jerome-Cohen's Investigating Mysteries, page 28.

## Student Bibliography

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Berke, Sally. *Monster at Loch Ness*. New York: Contemporary Perspectives, Inc., 1977.

This book presents the young reader with a description of the legend of the Loch Ness Monster and a fact-filled account of its numerous sightings. The book ends asking the question, "Does the Loch Ness Monster really exist or not?"

Carmichael, Carrie. *Bigfoot: Man, Monster, or Myth?* New York: Contemporary Perspectives, Inc., 1977.

This book presents the young reader with a fact-filled account of the various sightings of Bigfoot, concluding that it remains an unsolved mystery.

Christian, Mary Blount. *Sebastian (Super-Sleuth) and the Baffling Bigfoot*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990.

Sebastian, the canine super-sleuth, helps his master search for Bigfoot and other suspects at the Sasquatch Inn.



----- Sebastian (Super-Sleuth) and the Egyptian Connection. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988.

Sebastian tracks down both the smuggler and the smuggled goods: stolen artifacts from Egypt that have been shipped to his city.

----- Sebastian (Super-Sleuth) and the Impossible Crime. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992.

In this 'closed-room' mystery Sebastian uses all his skills to discover who stole the valuable painting during a black-tie reception at the museum.

Fleischman, Sid. The Bloodhound Gang in The Case of Princess Tomorrow. New York: Random House, 1981.

The dynamic trio, The Bloodhound Gang, work hard to discover whether Professor Diabolo and his fortune-teller, Princess Tomorrow are legit or not.

----- The Bloodhound Gang in The Case of the Cackling Ghost. New York: Random House, 1981.

Mrs. Fairbanks calls on the assistance of The Bloodhound Gang to discover if there really is a curse on her for possessing the Darjeeling Necklace.

Foltz, Jones, Charlotte. Fingerprints and Talking Bones: How Real-Life Crimes are Solved. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Books for Young Readers, 1997.

This book for young readers describes many true accounts that illustrate the fascinating world of crime-solving and what goes on behind the scenes of police work.

Landon, Lucinda . Meg Mackintosh and The Mystery at the Soccer Match. North Scituate, Rhode Island. Secret Passage Press, 1997.

Meg is hot on the trail as she works to discover who stole the gold medal during the soccer match.

----- Meg Mackintosh and The Case of the Curious Whale Watch. North Scituate, Rhode Island: Secret Passage Press, 1987.

Meg searches for a treasure map that is missing.

----- Meg Mackintosh and The Case of the Missing Babe Ruth Baseball. North Scituate, Rhode Island: Secret Passage Press, 1986.

Meg uses her keen eye and unparalleled deductive skills to discover the whereabouts of an autographed Babe

Ruth baseball that belongs to her grandpa.

Sharmat, Marjorie Weinman. Nate the Great. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Books for Young Readers, 1972.

In this first book of the series, the junior detective, Nate, solves the mystery of his friend Annie's lost picture.

----- Nate the Great and the Phony Clue. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Books for Young Readers, 1977.

Nate, with his faithful dog, Sludge, at his side, works against great odds to discover the meaning of a torn slip of paper on which appears the mysterious letters VITA.

----- Nate the Great Goes Undercover. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Books for Young Readers, 1974.

Nate goes undercover to discover who keeps raiding his neighbor Oliver's garbage can.

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Brown, Hazel and Brian Cambourne. Read and Retell. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1987.

This book describes in detail the read-and-retell procedure, how to implement it in your classroom and how to use written retellings as part of an assessment tool.

Evans, Marilyn. Guided Report Writing. Monterey, Calif.: Evan-Moor Corp., 1987.

This book presents a guided step-by-step process for writing a group report.

Goodman, Debra. The Reading Detective Club -- Solving the Mysteries of Reading. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1999.

This book offers the teacher a comprehensive overview of the reading process and describes how to sponsor a Reading Detective Club. It offers to the students (grades 3-8) a series of mystery cases to solve that are actually reading strategy lessons.

Gorman, Ed, Martin H. Greenberg, Larry Segriff and Jon L. Breen (eds.). The Fine Art of Murder. New York: Galahad Books, 1993.

This book offers an interesting and informative overview of the mystery field from the traditional mystery to the serial killer novel including movies, television and fiction.

Hoyt, Linda. Revisit, Reflect, Retell -- Strategies for Improving Reading Comprehension. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1999.

An invaluable resource for teachers, this book includes a collection of over 130 strategies and 90 reproducibles for use as reading extension activities that encourage high-quality responses to literature.

Jerome-Cohen, Deborah, ed. Investigating Mysteries -- Teacher's Sourcebook. New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1992.

This sourcebook lays out a 3-4 week reading-writing program that focuses on the genre of detective-fiction. Three children's mysteries have been chosen and can be used in conjunction with a wealth of suggested activities that help students analyze what they read, react to what they learn and use their knowledge to create their own mystery stories.

Keating, H. R. F. (ed.). WhoDunit? A Guide to Crime, Suspense & Spy Fiction. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1982.

A wonderful resource that presents a history of the whole genre and includes numerous chapters that analyze the various categories of crime fiction. It also provides a description of the works of over 500 novelists and profiles of the 90 most well-known characters of this genre.

----- Writing Crime Fiction. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986.

Written by a well-known British crime novelist, this book offers aspiring mystery writers helpful hints on the successful writing of a crime novel discussing such aspects as planning the structure of the crime story, building plot and characters, creating tension and

suspense, maintaining the story's momentum and resolving the mystery.

La Cour, Tage and Harald Mogensen, *The Murder Book: An Illustrated History of the Detective Story*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1971.

The history of crime fiction is told through vivid illustrations and gathered from all kinds of sources and texts. A valuable archive of the world's great detectives.

Morris, Patricia S. and Margaret A. Berri. *Mystery and Suspense*. West Nyack. New York: The Center for Applied Research Education, 1993.

Geared for grades 6-12, this book describes over 250 titles in annotated booklists and represents a range of reading levels. The 52 generic activity sheets aid students in vocabulary development and provide practice in the analysis of setting, plot, conflict, character, irony, theme and symbolism.

Most, Glenn W. and William W. Stowe, eds. *The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1983.

An invaluable collection of critical essays on detective-fiction.

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This book demonstrates how to use oral reading to help students develop comprehension. It offers 25 strategies for helping children learn to read aloud.

Penzler, Otto, Chris Steinbrunner and Marvin Lachman (eds.). *Detectionary: A Biographical Dictionary of Leading Characters in Mystery Fiction*. Woodstock, New York: The Overlook Press, 1977.

An invaluable reference book, this *Who's Who* of the mystery world describes in illustrations and in words fictional detectives great and small, their cases, methods of deduction, habits and so much more

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A collection of Poe's best stories that best characterize his work. The Auguste Dupin stories, the first modern detective stories in English, are included in this collection.

Queen, Ellery. *Queen's Quorum*. New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1969.

A good reference book that offers a history of the detective-crime short story through a description and rating system (assessing the work's historical significance, quality of literary style and rarity of first edition) of 106 books that Queen has deemed most important to the genre.

Robb, Laura. *Reading Strategies That Work*. New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1995.

This book describes in detail numerous reading strategies to offer students that foster independence in reading and help nurture a love of books.

Symons, Julian. *Bloody Murder -- From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel*. New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1985.

This resource book offers the reader a history of crime fiction describing important writers and their works through the ages. This revised edition includes a critique of many important crime fiction writers who have emerged since 1972.

Symons, Julian. *Great Detectives: Seven Original Investigations*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1981.

In this book great detectives like Miss Marple, Sherlock Holmes, Nero Wolfe, Maigret, Hercule Poirot, Philip Marlowe and Ellery Queen have been brought together in words (in the form of entertaining incidents in their lives as well as case histories) and pictures (as drawn by Tom Adams). Through these investigations we learn many fascinating details about these well-known sleuths.

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This book invites the reader on an excursion into the genre providing many interesting insights into the art of the detective story.

Winks, Robin W., ed. *The Historian As Detective*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1968.

In this interesting collection of historical detection classics (i. e. the murder of JFK) writers describe how historians work much like detectives do, using similar methods and confronting similar dangers of dealing with evidence to unravel old mysteries.

Woeller, Waltraud and Bruce Cassidy. *The Literature of Crime and Detection: An Illustrated History from Antiquity to the Present*. New York: The Ungar Publishing Company, 1988.

A history of the detective genre offering stories written by authors from different countries and time periods. The reader gets a look at how various cultures have dealt with the idea of crime in their literature.

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