

Welcome to Mystery Theatre!

Session #1: Get Your Ticket to the Show!

M. B. “Bud” Fields, Jr. DMA

Welcome to the workshop! I’m Bud Fields, and I will be presenting, in only four short weeks, basics that will help you in your writing of the mystery fiction genre. I hope you are expectant, excited, and empowered by commitment to complete this workshop.

I am going to do something very different than most workshops you will encounter from this series. The first object of this first workshop is to assign the final product. Your finished product for this workshop will be an original creative writing for evaluation by your fellow participants, and the WDC Community. You are to create a mystery story of not less than 2,500, nor more than 5,000 words in proper, publication-ready format. Please do not give in to find something familiar, such as a story or WIP, or something you’ve been working on for years. You can bring the things you learn in this workshop to anything you are writing—I promise! Let’s begin, shall we?

Let’s forget for just a bit that our end-product is to be a mystery story. I want you to think, for a moment, about the five “W”s of writing. If you have never heard of them, they are:

Who, what, where, when, why, and how. I want you to think seriously about how you would define them for a complete novice. I have a homework assignment for you which will focus on them, so your attention is really important. One of the things you will discover during this workshop is that many of the tools necessary for a successful mystery are already in your writing “toolbox”, yet you probably have never used them in the special way a mystery requires. Let me give you an example.

The creation of a successful mystery involves the presence, or more importantly the absence of one (or more) of the five “W”s. The more that are missing in your writing, the more complex the mystery. For this final “exam”, I am strongly suggesting that only one of the “W”s should be absent. You will assign each of the “W”s to one of the following categories. Your placement of the “W”s will define your mystery story. So, before you figure out what weapon was used, or where the crime occurred, or how Mrs. Flaherty was poisoned, just complete this step first. It doesn’t matter which goes where right now, so please don’t try to force one component of your mystery into a particular category. They might even change categories before your work is done:

Category 1: WHO?

Rule No. 1 of Mystery Writing: The puzzle is the main character of any successful mystery writing!

It is fair to say that you can tell who, on WDC has taken my course before because of this rule. I am very proud of my graduates. Some are editors of Newsletters (Mystery!), or are active mystery writers on our site. One most important way you can tell who has seen this material before is because of this rule. It is the first, and most important rule of mystery writing. You do not have to create the puzzle yet, but you MUST remember the truth of this rule throughout your writing. I would not be shocked to know that you have not heard of this rule before. New information is fun! This is a new tool to put in your toolbox. It may seem hard to make something like a puzzle into the main character. You don't have to. The quality of the puzzle is determined by the other components. You should always remember this.

Characters

All characters in a mystery are at least secondary characters to the main character, the puzzle. The characters in a mystery all serve a particular purpose: to first create, then solve the puzzle.

The Hero: A central secondary character, the hero is usually (but not always, by any means) the character who solves the puzzle. In the most successful mystery, the hero has an obstacle to overcome in order to successfully solve the puzzle. It must be larger than the hero. He/She/It (yes, the hero can easily be an "it".) The hero must have something to overcome (conflict), and may not—even if the puzzle is successfully solved. A character as OCD as Detective Monk often has to deal with the terrible death of his beloved wife Trudy when solving a completely unrelated case. In "The A Team, the character B. A. must often overcome a morbid fear of flying to help the team solve the puzzle. The difference is that these are not particular character traits of the character. They are, however often helpful in creating the obstacle the hero must, either alone or with assistance, overcome in order to solve the puzzle. Remember, the hero can solve the puzzle, yet not completely or successfully overcome the obstacle. That's up to you, the writer. Just remember it is optional. Yet, the obstacle must be well defined for the reader. You can pull empathy for the obstacle and/or the hero by creating an obstacle that many people might relate to. (Hero must traverse a tunnel full of snakes, for instance, to get to the key to the puzzle.) I HATE snakes. Just think about this, because the better or more complete the puzzle, the better the mystery—especially if the obstacle must clearly define the puzzle itself. You should play with this before defining your hero too completely.

The Antagonist: A central secondary figure, the antagonist is usually (but not always, by any means) the character who requires the action of the hero in order to solve the puzzle successfully. Please note: these are {u}my{/u} definitions. The proper use of them in your successful mystery will be part of the evaluation. Please use MY definitions for this workshop. I fully expect you to develop your own as you continue to examine the genre. You should; they are readily available to other, or even better definitions. The antagonist is NOT necessarily the one who created the puzzle. The antagonist is merely the counter-ego of the Hero. We can love the antagonist, or hate them passionately. Yet, they are critically important to the story. It is the antagonist which pulls the hero into and through the puzzle. That is the ONLY correct purpose the antagonist serves. The character may, or may not require confrontation with the hero to do their task. This is another optional decision you will make.

The Helper: A true secondary character. The helper(s) exist in the story for only one of two reasons, both of which can be terribly important to the successful writing of your mystery. They are present to move the story forward—or retard the forward movement of the puzzle’s solution. They can “speak” for the other major characters. They can create false leads, false threads, or even false plots. Like all other characters, however, they actually do serve the primary purpose well: moving the story forward, the action forward, and/or the solution of the puzzle forward. Your ability to creatively place the helper(s) into the story is a most creative challenge.

Helpers do not even need to be human, or animate. For instance, many stories written by Alfred Hitchcock included a recurring character/helper: a coat stand, usually in the entryway or hallway. Hitchcock said this was his most successful character of all, because it always did precisely the role he envisioned for it; absolutely nothing. It never played even a minor role in the solution to a puzzle, yet many the reader focused on the coat stand throughout the mystery, waiting for it to pronounce “who dunnit”, and solve the puzzle. Many’s the reader who gave this helper all the energy it could ever hope for, yet found by the end of the puzzle’s solution it had zero to do with the puzzle, or even the story. It became a well-known joke among mystery writers—even while most of them worked very hard during the writing days of this wonderful author to create an equally “important character” as homage to their mentor and fellow.

Any character of your story which does not supply information which helps move the action or the story forward, or leads to the solving of the puzzle is purely ancillary, and must disappear before the puzzle’s solution! They can take a hike, a walk, or a vacation. They can move to a different planet, and of course they can be killed off in a way most foul. (Be careful, though. You do not want to divert your plot to a dead end—do you??) The simple truth of it is that any character which does not follow the original rules must be dealt with. You may even choose, at some point, to delete them entirely from the story. You may love them, or hate them, but this is not their place to shine. Save them for another story—perhaps even their own. But get them out of this story!

We have determined that it is the puzzle itself that is *always* the main character of the story. I’d like to say a few words about the main character itself: the puzzle.

1. The puzzle must be clearly stated to the reader: the earlier the better.
2. The puzzle and it’s solution must be:
 - a. Conceivable
 - b. Believable
 - c. Achievable
 - d. Definable
 - e. Manageable
 - f. Controllable
3. The parts of the puzzle must be realistic, and relate-able to the reader. You may write situations or scenarios which the reader has never experienced, but you must make the complete experience real. This is where one of the most important reasons for accurate research comes into your work as a mystery writer. You should have no “God” moments, or unexplained

solutions to your puzzle. To do otherwise is to cheat the reader of the victory they are entitled to have from either solving the puzzle, or understanding reasonably how/why it is solved. To do so is poor writing, and well beneath any participant in this workshop.

4. The puzzle must make sense! Experiences must be completely explained to the reader. There is much in the way of leniency for the writer, so long as the puzzle, once explained is believable, etc. You may confuse, mis-direct, or befuddle your reader. You cannot lie to them—ever. Nor can you explain away the puzzle in the final paragraph through an unreasonable or untenable solution. Such “God” moments are anathema to good mystery writing, and must be avoided at all costs.
5. The puzzle MUST be solved. Believe it or not, this is a standard tool used in some authors’ work. Even if the writing is part of a serial or series of work, each title must have a full and complete solution. If that solution leads to further or future writing: excellent. But the puzzle must be completely solved and explained to the reader somewhere before “The End”. Not providing the solution is nothing less than bad and insincere writing.

We will discuss the remaining “W”s in future workshop sessions. “What?”, “Where?” “When?” “Why?” and “How?” are all equally important components of the successful mystery story. Notice, I said these are {b}equally{/b} important components to the story. The absence of one (or more) of them create the foundation of the puzzle to be solved. I trust that you, having seen a brief discussion of just one of these components, (“Who?”) you will spend some quality time this week evaluating the other components. The workshop’s brevity does not permit more complete examinations of these components.

ASSIGNMENT:

1. You should play around with the notion of characters for your mystery story. In this genre, however, understand that fully developed characters are singularly important to the solution to the puzzle, the main character in the story. I would suggest you “pencil in” your main character, and create secondary characters to bring the main character home (solve the puzzle). Believe me, your characters will change during the creation of your story, so do NOT love them too much at this point.
2. You should create your main character, and explain which of the components is missing to create the puzzle. It need be only as complete as is required to understand the puzzle itself. Go no further at this point. Don’t try to solve the puzzle (even though you feel you can). Let your secondary characters be limited to three: Protagonist, Antagonist, and one helper. Again, this is temporary! Give only enough information about your characters to let us see them—not know them. They will change as the development of the puzzle’s solution continues. Define them as fully as you feel necessary for your reader to “see” them. Include the other components in the list, except the one you choose to serve as the puzzle. Explain your choice.
3. Explain, as you understand them, the other components of the puzzle. Try to especially identify them as they would relate to the writing of a successful mystery. Explain the component you choose to omit as the creation of your puzzle, in full. Finally, explain how the absence of this component fuels your puzzle.

It is a lot to do, especially in one week. You will find, however, that it takes much less time than you might imagine once you begin the work. Try to define, not explain. The explanation comes later, in the solution of the puzzle. This is a particular exception to one of writing's most revered mantras: "Show, don't tell." We'll discuss why in a future workshop.

If you have any questions, concerns, suggestions, or problems with this assignment, please email me. I will do whatever I can to help you, and your mystery short story, succeed. In the meantime, until next we meet,

Write Well!

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