

Welcome to Mystery Theatre!

Session #2: Casting the Show and Setting the Script

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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.

We’ve pretty much gotten, by now, our cast of characters for our mystery fiction short story. Although I asked you not to, I have a feeling you have some idea of the story itself. That’s unfair to the workshop—but perfectly normal for the mystery writer.

I know that, because I, too, have an idea for my story. I thought I would work through the workshop with you to illustrate some of the principles, tools, and processes that the workshop presents. So, without further ado, here are my stars.

1. The star of the show: **How** did Mrs. Flaherty’s cat get on the roof?
2. The protagonist: Mrs. Myrtle Flaherty, a 68 year-old grandmother of 4 who lives alone in her small Cape Cod bungalow on Elm Street. She loves to cook, knit, and care for her cat, “Fibbertygibbit”, a grey Tabby who is, at 5 years old, a friendly but inquisitive friend.
3. The Antagonist: “Fibbertygibbit” (“Fibby”), the cat.
4. The Helper: Mr. Milo Festerberg, the 48 year-old mailman who hand-delivers the mail to each of his addresses along his route. Of course, there is only one mail route in this small hamlet, deep in the woods of StoneyShire. “Mr. Milo” knows, and is known by everyone to be a dedicated mailman, and good friend to the neighbors he serves.

I created these characters about three minutes before writing them for you. By creating just some very cursory information, the puzzle came to me. It’s not a thriller, perhaps, but it WILL be a mystery to be solved. Throughout the story, we will come to know the characters, the community, and the puzzle to be solved.

I can tell you, at this moment, that the puzzle will be successfully solved (with no harm to “Fibby”). I chose a particular genre of mystery that I have never written before, the young adult mystery. This is as much a shock to me as it may be to you. Youth mysteries are particularly difficult to write, and I am certain this one will require much editing. That’s okay with me. So long as I have new words, I have job security. I know the last two words of this mystery will be “The End”, the cat will be safely returned to

his loving companion and owner, Mrs. Myrtle Flaherty, and “Mr. Milo” will play an important role in the mystery as it unfolds.

My job now is to build on the skeleton the characters have created, and this is a unique, but completely successful manner of creating a mystery. Yours may be scenery driven, or story driven, or even plot driven. That’s wonderful. The one thing I love to do is to write character driven mysteries. This is the only “usual” writing component for me.

Also notice that I have avoided the “6th W”, “How?” All the other components are, or will be used in my mystery story. It remains for “Fibby” to climb to new heights somehow, and for Mr. Milo and/or Mrs. Flaherty to solve the puzzle. I have chosen for Mrs. Flaherty to solve the puzzle, and Mr. Milo to bring her the necessary information to do so. In order for my mystery to be “authentic”, I must create a scenery, actions and movements, dialogue and conversation sufficient to announce, then solve the mystery. So let’s get to work.

A. Scenery

The primary location of the story is Mrs. Flaherty’s home. Can you see it yet? I can. I am presuming, for the sake of this workshop that you cannot yet visualize Mrs. Flaherty OR her house. I must create a portrait that you can see, feel and perhaps even taste. We must meet Mrs. Flaherty first, along with “Fibby” the cat. Therefore, I have the obligations of my first scene set before me. I must keep in mind, at all times that the solution to the puzzle begins immediately. The reader may not yet know (if I write well enough) that solutions are being prepared even in the first scene, perhaps even before the puzzle itself is announced. (Note: If you like, you can follow along as my story develops [here](#).)

We have a few challenges to overcome before we continue. Perhaps you can see them. One of the most important is the (believe it or not) word count. Because our limit is strict, every word must count. This is a special challenge of the final product, not the first draft. My best advice to you is to stay as close to the word count limit as possible from the first writing. We must balance the portraits of the characters with the action in the story. I know that, because of my audience (8-12 year old children) the words must be simple, the action continuous, and the puzzle and solution appropriate to the age group. The challenge is to do both successfully. The more words I use for the character identification, the fewer words I have for the story itself.

B. The Puzzle

I also must have a clear idea of the story’s plotlines. From introduction to “The End”, I must create clear lines of action, plot, and scenery that will do the job I have assigned to them. I must begin with the main character, then apply the secondary characters as needed to create the solution. In this mystery, I opted to omit the “How?” of the story. It goes something like this:

At some point, in some way, the cat gets onto the roof of Mrs. Flaherty's house. Mrs. Flaherty believes "Fibby" has gone missing, and scours the neighboring woods, homes, and lanes of the hamlet/village to find him. Through conversations with neighbors (and especially the mailman), Mrs. Flaherty believes the cat, her beloved companion, to be lost forever to her. Mr. Milo helps Mrs. Flaherty find the missing cat, and retrieve it for Mrs. Flaherty, his friend.

While many stories do not have a particular moral, every story must have some significant "take away" value for the reader. It must, of course, be a good read. This is determined by good writing, and good writing alone.

Regardless of the situation, there is absolutely nothing an editor or publisher can do with lousy writing. This is the one thing that a writer can do to insure their own success and the success of their writing. The better the writing in the first draft, the better the writing in the final version that you submit to the publisher. That is the sole responsibility of the writer, and the contract made with the reader. Grammar, writing mechanics, dialog, sentence structure, and paragraph formation are all exclusive responsibilities of the writer. Please remember this. It should be apparent from the first word of your story, clear through to the final two words: "The End".

For my story, the story focuses around the love of a friend. Good friends are a treasure, and must be carefully cared for. We'll see that in every point of the story—or we should. No matter how you "build" the characters, you MUST remember the point is to take the reader from the puzzle to the solution: with every word.

How did Mrs. Flaherty lose her cat? How did the cat get to the roof? How is "Fibby" found? How is he returned to his friend and companion, Mrs. Flaherty?

These questions will frame the story. Notice the first word in each sentence. Once decided, you must stay with the component you have chosen to "drive" your mystery. I might even begin with some background on "how" Mrs. Flaherty and Fibbertygibbit came to be a pair. (Or not. My choice. If I want the reader to "become" part of the family, I will. If I want the story to move along, I might deliver the information while the story develops.)

C. The Components

I have the puzzle. I have the characters, as described earlier. Completing the components will create the flesh I put on the skeleton I have created. These are tools available to the writer of the mystery in a very special way. Yes, we want characters we can love (or hate) in our story. Yes, we want a compelling plot to maintain the interest of the reader. Our scenes must be clearly developed in a good and memorable way.

"Who?"

The three characters are identified in my mind. Now, I must permit (or compel) the readers to see them as I do. That is my job. More importantly, it is your job now. Seeing your characters as if you are viewing a video or photograph of them as they would appear in the story is the goal.

“What?”

What is the purpose of the story? What is the problem to be solved? What is the setting (see “Where?”)? What happens?

“Where?”

Where does the story, and most importantly the action take place? Where are the characters as the story develops? Where is the placement of the clues, in relation to the plot and story line?

“When?”

When does the story take place? Is it a particular day, week, month or year? When does the action occur that matters? (If it doesn’t matter, it needs to disappear. Save it for another story!) When is an important question for any story, because this is the component that actually defines the “arc” of the story. When did the missing component occur?

“Why?”

This component may seem simple, yet it is not. Why does the action develop and occur in the story? Why do certain actions take place by one particular character over another? (Character validation) Why does the action occur as it does?

“How?”

How do the characters relate to each other (or not)? How does the story develop? (Speed, arc, scenes, etc.) How will the puzzle be developed by the hero overcoming the obstacle? How is the story relative to the reader? How soon do we develop the characters in the story? How will we develop the plot and arc, using dialog, scenery, setting, etc.?

D. Using The Tools

While it may seem ridiculous, there are significant yet effective points to ponder here. The best time to ponder them is before the first word of the first draft is written. These components, used correctly, can give you a huge advantage in your writing. Knowing these things helps immensely when you begin writing. We’ve already seen that any component missing can create the stage for a mystery. When you can “see” your characters, “hear” them speak, watch them walk, and identify them in a police lineup by their clothes, or their voice—then you have the opportunity to begin that work that only you can do. Isn’t it interesting that so much work can be done before the first word of the story is written?

There are magical tools to help with this task. Software can be found, or even purchased, to help you with each of the components of writing, or sketching characters, or defining plot lines along the way, or even suggestions for chapter breaks and how to drag the reader across the page turn for the next

exciting chapter. I use several of them myself, because my writing usually involves hundreds of thousands of words. I have become comfortable using a couple of software titles. You may choose to do character identification cards, or make more complex scene sketches (even down to the placement of the characters) if you wish. Some people use notebooks, or Journals, or index cards. I recommend software because it keeps me close to the primary tool of my craft: a keyboard. I am a writer. I write—every day. I write at least 2,500 new words each and every day of my life. My personal goal is to finish the day with 250 words I will keep. Some days, I even make it! LOL

In this workshop, we have a total of 31 days to create publishable material that is not less than 2,500, nor more than 5,000 words. That is between 81-162 *“good”* words each and every day of this month. Holidays, the warm Summer sun, vacation, appointments, sporting events—all of these and other “distractions” vie for your time and attention. With a relatively small goal to success, you can complete a publishable and memorable mystery short story in the time allotted—IF you dedicate yourself to the task. Let’s begin, shall we?

ASSIGNMENT:

1. Examine all the six components available to you as a mystery writer. Choose your “missing” component”. Consider how each of the other five components will be used by you in the creation of your story. (Notice, I did not say, “in the puzzle”. This will occur naturally if you do the work of qualifying the components first, as I have directed.)
2. Write a brief synopsis of your story. (Remember back in May?) Less than 2 full pages, please. Bitem link your story synopsis in the assignments area for evaluation, review and comment. (All assignment parts can be in the same document, just identify each part.)
3. *“Pencil in”* your characters within the story line. Where do they enter/leave the story? Create a character sketch that tells just enough to let me see and understand each character, as relates to the story itself.
4. In 500 words or less, tell me the entire story, including the solution to the puzzle.
5. Do the same as #4 above, in 50 words or less. (Create a tag line.)
6. 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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