

California Writers Club Presentation Handout
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All Stories Need Mystery

Character, plot, setting, and theme are considered the core elements of all types of writing, and, as an author of the *Spirit Lake Mystery* series and numerous short stories, I believe borrowing a few elements from murder mystery writing could also benefit all types of writing.

It's true, murder mysteries need a murder, and they are somewhat formulaic. There are conventions. Readers do not like it if a mystery author strays too far from what they expect to find in a murder mystery. Authors need to keep the reader **guessing** who the killer is until the very end. They need to be **unpredictable**. The mystery reader **participates** by trying to figure out who the murderer is before the end. And the mystery reader expects **misdirection, surprises, twists, conflict** and lots of **tension and suspense**.

A glut of online movies and TV series and the sheer number and accessibility of books of all types have transformed the writing landscape. The books that win prizes and a large and dedicated readership keep readers curious and engaged from start to finish. If attention lags, there's always an alternative for readers to pursue. Long, lavish descriptions of people, places, and things, even if beautifully written, must serve the story and keep it moving forward or most readers will lose interest.

Here are a few examples of how techniques murder mystery writers use can benefit non-murder mysteries—novels, short stories, poetry, memoir, and other genres.

1. Keep your reader guessing

Introduce a question, but don't resolve it right away. Do that repeatedly. Curiosity keeps readers turning pages. It doesn't have to be a fast-paced thriller or action-adventure story.

Marilynne Robinson, in her 2004 Pulitzer-prize winning *Gilead*, used this technique throughout her book: The main character is an elderly dying clergyman, the pace is elegiac, the writing lyrical and unhurried and yet the reader remains curious throughout the story. Why is this highly educated man married to a much younger uneducated woman who appears stoic, sad, reticent? We don't learn about their relationship until near the end of the book. His wife is mentioned many times with no explanation about what drew them together—and each time the reader's curiosity is re-aroused, yet we're never given a description of her other than a reference to how much younger she is. We've only heard her speak and interact with him, and it's puzzling. Williamson also raises our curiosity about other characters, their relationships and past histories and she keeps us waiting for answers.

2. Be unpredictable

Two great examples of **unpredictability** are from bestselling memoirs: Mary Carr's, *The Liar's Club*, published in 1995. And Tara Westover's, *Educated*. They look at the unpredictable lives that daughters of erratic fathers and mothers experience. Frightening events escalate chapter to chapter and that tension keeps the reader in suspense until the end. These daughters love their parents. What the daughters do to deal with life situations far beyond their years, are also compelling mysteries within the stories.

3. Invite your reader to participate

Mystery readers can be a tough audience. They don't like to be talked down to or *told* what they can figure out on their own. Non-mystery writers don't need to be armchair sleuths, but their readers will also easily lose interest if underestimated. Assume your reader is smart and don't explain or over-explain.

Harper Lee, the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird* said, "The book to read is not the one that thinks *for* you, but the one which makes *you* think."

Oliver Sachs, a neurologist, wrote many books and one of them was made into the movie, *Awakenings*. Why were so many non-scientific people, like me, drawn to case histories about his patients' more unusual neurological conditions and obscure brain disorders? Sachs keeps the reader enthralled and attempting to understand the complex workings of human minds without talking down to us. He keeps *our* minds working as he unlocks these neurological mysteries.

4. Use misdirection, surprises, twists

Every character in a story must *want* something, and the writer's job is to keep them from getting it for most of the story, whether it's a novel or a short story. How? Throw something in their way to send them in the wrong direction, or surprise them with the discovery that they didn't want it after all. Short story readers love a twist at the end, something they hadn't thought of but that is plausible.

National Book Award winner, Jesmyn Ward's short story *Cattle Haul* uses all three techniques—misdirection, twist, and surprise. An earnest young black man is determined to make enough money to afford a well so he can have water for his trailer. He is pushed by the trucking company he works for to drive nonstop. His father, thinking he is helping, provides

drugs to keep him awake on the road. The story is heartrending, suspenseful, and keeps leading the reader deeper into caring for this young man and his load of miserable, maybe dying, cattle, while Ward continually ratchets up this young man's, and the reader's, belief that the worst is about to happen. The twist is that the worst isn't what we think. This story is online in electricliterature.com.

5. Use suspense, tension, and conflict

Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* explores the main character's relationship with the man she loves using conflict, tension and suspense, but the book also raises questions about culture and race and keeps the reader's attention through biting and cringe-worthy social critique.

I hope my exploration of these topics has given you a few ideas about how mystery writing techniques might be useful for the different types of books and stories **you** are writing. If you're unfamiliar with the books I've mentioned and are interested, all can be found in bookstores, online and libraries.

And if you'd like to write your own stories using these techniques, reread books you've enjoyed and look for examples of how authors use those techniques. Being a writer means always learning the craft and that's one of the things I love about writing.