

YPSIWRTITES • MYSTERY MAKER CHALLENGE



Mystery Maker Challenge is a part of Ypsilanti District Library's Summer Challenge, which means you can earn online badges as you write and win themed prize baskets filled with goodies from local businesses.

The Mystery Maker Challenge also has activity kits to enhance your mystery writing experience. Draw chalk outlines, create your own wanted poster, or write a news story about your mystery. These kits are available while supplies last!

To sign up for the Summer Challenge or to reserve kits, visit www.ypsilibrary.org/mysterymaker or call (734) 482-4110.

Special thanks to the Friends of the Ypsilanti District Library for providing funding that made these kits possible.





HISTORICAL SITE
OR LANDMARK





THE HISTORIC SITE AND LANDMARK THEME

The theme you choose makes a difference to your mystery. The historic site and landmark theme can provide a unique setting and inspiration for your plot. For this theme, plan to think about time as well as place.

Ypsilanti is home to several historic sites and landmarks that would be perfect for a mystery setting. Here are some from which you might choose:

- Historic homes, like the [Brinkerhoff-Becker House](#)
- Historic churches, like the First Methodist Episcopal Church on Washtenaw and the [Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church](#)
- Historic buildings on the campus of Eastern Michigan University, like [Starkweather Hall](#)
- [Willow Run Airport](#)
- [The Ypsilanti Water Tower](#)
- [The Ladies Literary Club building](#)
- [The Ypsilanti Historic District](#)
- [Prospect Park](#)

These historic sites and landmarks—and the many others in the Ypsilanti community—each have documented histories about their origins that can add realistic elements and characters to your story. For example, many historic sites were built for one purpose which evolved into another over time, often when new owners took control or communities had different needs.

One of these might be the setting for your mystery, or you can use one or more of the historic sites in Ypsi to learn about different time periods or to find information and resources to make your mystery historically accurate. You could write a mystery that begins in one time period and ends in another but keeps the same setting. Even if your mystery is set in modern times, think about the role that the history of the site or landmark plays in your story.





WRITING YOUR MYSTERY

Use the guidance and activities in the rest of this document to plan and write your mystery.

SOME KEY TERMS

Fiction writers use special language to describe the different parts of a story. Here are some key terms we'll use in helping you write your mystery (adapted from "Literary Devices and Terms" at literarydevices.net):

- **Protagonist:** The protagonist is your main character or characters. In a mystery, this is often the person who investigates and solves the mystery. Two examples are Hercule Poirot in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* or Sherlock Holmes and John Watson in the Sherlock Holmes series.
- **Antagonist:** The antagonist is the character in your story who makes trouble for the main characters, or in mysteries is the one who commits the crime. They are usually the villains of the story. Two examples are Lord Voldemort in the Harry Potter series or Moriarty in the Sherlock Holmes stories.
- **Supporting Characters:** Supporting characters are characters other than the protagonist who are connected to them in some way, either as friends or caregivers, as challenging individuals, or as someone who inspires or informs (teachers, mentors, etc.). Two examples are Monsieur Bouc in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* or Hermione Granger in the Harry Potter series.
- **Rising Action:** The rising action is the series of events that leads up to the climax. These events develop the story and create suspense. This is like the trip up the hill on a roller coaster.
- **Climax:** The climax is the most dramatic part of your story. It's what your entire mystery story builds toward: It's when the main character(s) puts it all together. Think about when the final piece of a puzzle falls into place or when you arrive at the top of the roller coaster.
- **Falling Action:** The falling action takes place immediately after the climax of your story. It begins to wrap up the story and tie up the loose ends, leading toward the conclusion. In a mystery, it would be the events following the solving of the case—the actions that take place once the mystery is solved. Think about a final chase, or the trip down the roller coaster hill.
- **Resolution:** The resolution is the end of your story. This is where all the loose ends are tied up, and the case is marked as closed.

Before you start writing your mystery, you'll want to begin thinking about the setting for the mystery—where it takes place—and about your characters—who all are involved and what their roles and personalities are.




DESCRIBING YOUR SETTING


The setting of your mystery can impact the entire feel of it. A mystery set in a busy city feels different from one set in the countryside. Here are some questions and activities to help you make decisions about and describe your historic setting or landmark.

Questions to Answer

- What is the historic site or landmark?
- Why this historic site or landmark?
- What is the age of the site or landmark?
- What is its history?
- What is the time period?
- Will your mystery begin and end in the same time period?
- Does your mystery span a number of years, or move around in time?

Writing Activities

 If you still need to choose a setting, try looking through the [National Register of Historic Places in Washtenaw County](#) and find a landmark or two that stand out to you. Read through their linked histories (if they have one) or, if you are able, visit the sites or landmarks and read the plaques describing their histories that often are found on the property. Write a narrative of what might have happened there or what it might have felt like to be there when it was new. Can you imagine what the surroundings would have looked like throughout a landmark's history and how they have changed?

 Write a paragraph or two describing the historic site or landmark you've chosen. Make a list of two to five things that you or your protagonist can see, smell, touch, hear, and/or taste. Also, how would the scene change depending on the time of day or year? You could take or draw a picture of the site to go along with your description.

CREATING AND DEVELOPING YOUR CHARACTERS

A good mystery has good characters. Let your setting inspire your characters. Does a specific site, landmark, or person in history inspire you in relation to a potential character? Is there a house you can imagine your character living in, or a church you imagine them attending? Are you imagining the caretaker for the Ypsilanti Cemetery, or a suffragette and member of the Ladies Literary Club?

You'll want your readers to really get to know your characters. This helps readers become more invested in your story. Be sure to use a lot of details and dialogue to create memorable characters. Here are some questions, activities, and online resources for making decisions about your characters.

Questions to Answer

- Who will your protagonist(s) be? Mysteries usually have a detective, private investigator, or someone else who solves the crime. Describe them. What are their physical traits? What kind of clothes do they wear? What is their personality like? Are they friendly, distant, talkative, quiet, eager?
- Who are your supporting characters? Describe each of them using the questions above for guidance.
- Who is the antagonist—or perpetrator? Describe them as well.
- What character quirks help us know your characters better? For example, you might have a character who is very attentive to their appearance. That could indicate that they pay attention to detail. If their appearance starts slipping, it could show that the character is under a lot of pressure or is distracted.
- How are your characters related to your site or landmark? Are they locals? Visitors? Do they have a personal connection to the site?



Writing Activities

- Use this [Character Sheet from YpsiWrites](#) to work out details about your characters, their lives, and their motivations.
- Interview your character to make them real to you. Ask questions about their previous experiences and memories, their favorite foods and activities, and their deepest, darkest secrets. Imagine their answers.
- Complete a suspect description form. Include as many physical details as you can think of—for example, sex, race, age, height, weight, hair color and cut, eye color, facial hair, complexion, scars, tattoos. Also consider clothing and accessories—does the character wear glasses? What type of clothing do they wear? Do they wear a hat or jewelry, or carry a purse or bag? The more details you can imagine, the better.
- Create a [wanted poster](#) like the one provided. Here’s [another version](#) you might use.

WRITING DIALOGUE

Once you have a good sense of your characters, you can begin thinking about how they’ll talk to one another. Here are a few questions and activities to help you begin writing dialogue.

Questions to Answer

- How might you convey personality traits through word choices?
- Will there be a lot of talking as part of the action in the mystery, or will your mystery be more descriptive and written in a third-person voice?





Writing Activities

- Think about the purpose the dialogue will serve in your mystery and write a dialogue that subtly serves that purpose. Is it revealing something about your characters or setting? Is it helping you to build your plot or plant clues that will come together in the climax of the story? Maybe it’s just helping you to increase the tension between characters, or even the tension your readers might be feeling. In a story, meaningless chatter can be boring; dialogue done deliberately and well will add interest because it serves a purpose.
- Do some research! If your mystery is set in a historic time period, there may be vocabulary or a style of speaking that is unique to that time. Referring to old dictionaries, like [A Classical Dictionary of Vulgar Speech](#), which defines “vulgar” terms used by commoners, or novels published in that time period, may help you make your characters’ dialogue more authentic and believable.



Writing Activities

Rising Action activities (adapted from materials for National Novel Writing Month):

-  Write a list of up to five events that build up to the climax of your mystery. These events will help you move your protagonist toward solving the mystery.
-  Keep increasing the conflict by adding detail to your list of events. Create obstacles your protagonist needs to navigate or insert some hard choices they need to make. You can use supporting characters to help.
-  Map it out! Use paper and a pencil to sketch out the room or area where the mystery was discovered. Add in details about where evidence was found, entrances and exits, and any other important noticings.
-  Write an incident report. Use this [incident report worksheet from YpsiWrites](#) and complete it as if you were an investigator looking into your mystery.



MYSTERY MAKER KIT ACTIVITIES

- **Fingerprints.** Criminals often leave fingerprints at the scene of a crime. Use the materials from the kit and try dusting for fingerprints around your house. Write about fingerprints in your mystery.
- **Chalk Outline.** If your crime has a victim, or a stolen object, use the chalk from your kit to create an outline of the person or thing. Then take a picture or make a quick sketch. Add this to your evidence.

ARRIVING AT THE CLIMAX AND BIG REVEAL

When it comes to the climax and big reveal—the point at which you expose your readers to something previously unknown yet key to your plot—you'll need to make decisions about what you want your readers to know and how you want them to feel about what happened. You might also want to have a moral to your story. Answering the questions below can help you make your decisions.


This is where your mystery begins picking up steam, becoming faster-paced and more action packed, and it may also involve a plot twist.

Questions to Answer

- Do you want to use lots of clues to build to a surprise, or do you want to hold your readers in suspense?
- What emotions do you want your readers to feel—anger, empathy, fear, anticipation? Deciding this can also help you with the rising action. What events and circumstances might trigger these different emotions? For example, does your protagonist end up in some kind of danger? What is it, and how do they escape?
- What is the moral to your story? In other words, is there a lesson you want your mystery to convey? Is it that everyone has a dark side? Is it that good always prevails over evil?
- If your story has a moral, how will you convey this? Through the protagonist's thoughts? Through the actions or dialogue of some of your characters?



Writing Activity

 Write a paragraph or two that contains a big reveal and changes the plot to your mystery, just to see where it will take you. Think about how this will affect the story’s outcome and how your readers might feel about it. In a mystery, this could contain new information that completely changes the protagonist’s point of view, or it could uncover the true identity of a character that previously masqueraded as someone or something else.

RESOLVING THE MYSTERY

The falling action is what happens next (after the climax). Now that your protagonist has survived the climax (though others might not have!), how will you wrap up the loose ends? Remember that coming full circle back to something from the beginning of your mystery can be a good way to close your mystery. This part also usually moves and reads pretty quickly.


Choose from a variety of brainstorming questions and writing activities to help you with this part.

Questions to Answer

- Is the resolution simply a matter of revealing the answer to the mystery, or revealing who the perpetrator is?
 - How does the resolution of your mystery affect the characters and the setting (e.g., the historic site or landmark you chose) at the heart of your story?
 - How did your characters react and feel, and/or how were they impacted by what happened? Can everyone go back to their daily lives?
 - How was the historic site or landmark itself changed by the events that occurred? Are there changes that need to be made at the historic site or landmark to prevent something from happening in the future?
 - What was the motive for the crime that occurred? How did it involve the site or landmark? Was it coincidence that the mystery was tied to that location, or did the perpetrator intentionally target it?
- Once the mystery is solved, what other steps need to be taken to ensure justice is done?
 - What will your protagonist do now that the mystery is solved? Do you want to add foreshadowing for the next mystery? If so, how might you do that?



Writing Activity

 Create a headline and write a news story. The case is solved! The papers are all abuzz! Now it is time to write an eye-catching headline about your mystery. If you're feeling ambitious, add in a couple short paragraphs and draw some pictures that would be featured in a front page article about the case. The [YpsiWrites news template](#), also included in the Mystery Maker Kit, can help you get started with your news story if you need more inspiration.

FINISHING TOUCHES

Now that you've written a mystery, there are a few finishing touches you won't want to forget: writing your author biography, revising and editing your mystery, and publishing it.

Readers like to know about authors, so write your own biography. Make it short, like the ones you see in books (usually these are on the back inside cover). Add in any fun anecdotes you think readers would like to know about you. You can even take an author photo. There are some pretty great ones out there, so feel free to be inspired by other authors and their photos.

Another important part of the writing process is getting feedback and revising. Consider sharing your story with friends and other writers and ask for their feedback. Or sign up for a consultation on [YpsiWrites.com](#), and one of our trained writing consultants will be happy to read your mystery and provide you with feedback!

Finally, if you'd like to share your mystery with others, try to publish it. You can also submit it to [YpsiWrites.com](#). We'll be showcasing some of the mysteries that writers submit on our Mystery Maker Challenge page!