

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.





SPOOKY





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 spooky, old building feels different from one set in an idyllic countryside home. Here are some questions and activities to help you make decisions about and describe your spooky setting.

Questions to Answer

- What is the setting? Is it one of the haunted places in Ypsilanti? Is it an old home or public building?
- Why this setting?
- What is spooky about the setting?
- What time of year is it? For that matter, what year is it?

Writing Activities

- 🔍 Think about the everyday, physical features or objects found in your setting that are often taken for granted, like attics, windows, furniture, or toys. How might these be turned into something spooky? Describe how one of these places or objects looks or feels to be in or around, or how people react to it upon noticing its unusual features. Giving a normally safe place or object a creepy element could be useful for setting the tone and putting your readers on edge.
- 🔍 Write a paragraph or two describing the setting you've chosen. If it's a real place, visit it! Make a list of two to five things that you or your protagonist can see, smell, touch, hear, and/or taste. How would the scene change depending on the time of day or year?
- Try looking to another genre for inspiration about settings and characters. Think about the settings in some of your favorite stories, both true and fictional, and how those or similar settings might be transformed into a spooky setting. If you're really stuck, you could even browse online for writing prompts for genres overlapping mystery, like this article on [25 Horror Writing Prompts](#) from MasterClass.

CREATING AND DEVELOPING YOUR CHARACTERS

A good mystery has good characters. Let your setting inspire your characters. Does a specific place or legend surrounding your setting inspire you in relation to a potential character? Is there an heirloom or book your character is obsessed with?

You'll want your readers to really get to know your characters, even if they don't particularly like them; in a spooky mystery, even your protagonist may have significant character flaws. Being interested in your characters 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.



Writing Activities

- 🔍 Consider creating an unusual, supernatural, or invented creature as a character. Perhaps your narrator is a chronic liar, clairvoyant, a ghost, or an other-worldly character like a fairy or gremlin. Describe the character and write what role they might play in your mystery. Articles like [How to Create a Monster That Terrifies Your Readers](#) by Sarah Gribble may provide inspiration for this type of character.
- 🔍 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.
- 🔍 Get creative! A spooky character is likely to have some odd mannerisms or speech. Maybe give your character an unusual, repetitive physical quirk that doubles as body language. You might also invent odd words, phrases, or grammatical constructs that make your character sound different once people get to know them. Making your character's speech and/or body language a bit abnormal may add to your character's depth and make your mystery a bit spookier.



BUILDING THE PLOT

Now that you've chosen your setting and begun developing your characters, it's time to map out the action for your mystery. Keep in mind that most, but not all, mysteries have a crime at the center of their plots. What will your main mystery be? Think about your setting and your characters. What feels authentic to those places and people? These questions and the activity will help you generate ideas and begin building your mystery.

Questions to Answer





- What is the crime (or other mystery)?
- Why did it occur?
- Who was involved?
- When was it committed?
- Where did it happen?
- How was it committed?
- What unique or special circumstances might have been in play?

CREATING THE RISING ACTION

The rising action is the series of events that leads up to the climax. It's where you set up the tension, stage the mystery, and begin introducing your characters and setting. With a spooky setting, you might want to think about creating an unknown entity that remains mysterious as long as possible—if it is ever revealed. This can add to the thrill readers experience. Try a few of the following activities to spark your imagination.


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 spooky setting where the mystery was discovered. Add in details about where evidence was found 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.



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](#) 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 making revisions. 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!