

Pointy Hat

Guide to Mystery-Making

Introduction

Welcome! This guide is designed to help you create mystery-based adventures for your TTRPG games. This method is system agnostic, which means it can be used for any game, including 5e. This guide is not here to teach you how to make campaign-wide mysteries, such as a campaign revolving around unmasking who is behind a nefarious, campaign-spanning plot, but rather how to tell a mystery in the context of a one-shot, an adventure, or a short arc.

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Mystery Questions

This method revolves around 3 questions to create your mystery, 4 questions if you count the one we ask in this paragraph. In order to follow along with this method, you must answer these questions in order and then proceed on to the Clues section of the method. The very first question to ask yourself is ***What is your Mystery?*** All subsequent questions depend upon this one. Your mystery could be a murder mystery, where the party has to uncover the identity of a murderer, but it could be finding out who stole a precious item or the exact set of events that led to something happening. As long as the answer is not clear from the start and your party has to find clues to find this answer, it counts as a mystery for this method.

Once you have decided what your mystery is, we can proceed on to the real questions used in the mystery-making method.

I: Who Did It?

Who is behind this mystery? Who is the murderer? The thief? The culprit? If this is your first mystery, you can start with a simple murder performed by one murderer, but your “who” can be more complicated than that: perhaps the thief had accomplices, perhaps it isn’t a who but a what, perhaps what looks like an elaborate murder mystery turns out to be a series of unfortunate events and there is no murderer to uncover at all.

II: Why Did They Do It?

This is called a “*motive*”: the reason why someone commits a crime. Motives can range in complexity, from something simple like money, to something more emotional like revenge. The motive behind the mystery can define the tone of the adventure, so think carefully of what tone you’re trying to set. A comical adventure might go for a goofier motive, or a simpler motive for its villain, whereas a more adult adventure might try to make the players empathize with the perpetrator of the crime by giving them a sympathetic motivation.

III: How Did They Do It?

This is often called a “*method*”. This is the most important question to answer when it comes to deciding the difficulty of your adventure. The more complicated the method, the more complicated it will be for your players to solve it. A simple murder method with fewer moving parts will be easier for your players to uncover, and vice versa.

Clues

Once you have answered the three questions to make your mystery: the Who, the Why, and the How, you are ready to create the clues to solve your mystery:

- Each clue must tie back to at least one of the questions.
- Each question must have at least 3 clues that lead to its answer.
- The more complicated the method, the more clues must explicitly point towards it.

Clues can be physical objects that tie back to an answer to one of the questions, like for example the murder weapon, or they can be conversations that the party can “unlock” by asking the right questions to an NPC.

Once you have your clues, it’s time to assign them to specific places, NPCs, or even events. You can gate access to clues with combat to spice up the adventure, or put them behind puzzles or traps. If your adventure can only be resolved by bringing evidence to the authorities, it’s good to categorize what clues constitute solid evidence that can lead to an end to your adventure.

Remember, just like for any puzzle, it’s important for you to remain flexible. Perhaps you had placed a clue in the master bedroom, but a player had the idea to find a clue behind the painting in the drawing room. If you do not see any reason why that clue would not be there, it’s better for you to change the location of that clue and reward that player for their deduction and investigation.

Using this clue method reduces the chances of your players being stumped by the mystery, as they have three chances to find something that can help them find the answer to their questions. It also prevents you from having to cut in with “tips” and “hints” in the middle of the mystery, which can make your players feel like they did not solve the mystery on their own. Forcing yourself to come up with clues also ensures that the answers to your questions can indeed be inferred through evidence. If you find yourself having a lot of trouble (or relying to heavily on specific NPC dialogue) to come up with clues for parts of your method, it’s time for you to

reassess your answer to “*How Did They Do It?*” is too esoteric and complex for anyone to find out.

A Final Note on Mysteries

Mysteries can be a fantastic way to break up long stretches of combat-heavy adventures by shifting the focus from a combat-centric focus to an adventure centered more on deduction, role playing, and logic.

There are no rules that state that mysteries cannot have combat in them, however. You can very much choose to end your mystery by the criminal fighting the party to stop them from uncovering their crime, or by making it so a crucial piece of evidence must be obtained through combat.

You know your group and what they prefer doing at the table, tailor this mystery like you would tailor any other adventure to suit their preferences.

A Clue Board Example

Here’s an example of a “Clue Board”. This table allows you to quickly check what clues your party has already gathered and what is left for them to find during the adventure.

You can copy this clue board on your own google doc, delete the examples, and fill it with your own clues.

Clue	Question	Location	Special	Found
ex: Bloody Knife	How	Porch (by the back door)	-	No
ex: Diary	Who, Why	Master Bedroom	(hidden in a jewelry box with a puzzle lock)	Yes
ex: Spell Components for a Lycanthropy Potion	Who, How	The woods (on the fur of magically transformed wolves)	Battle	No

