NEW YORK NOIR: A HANDBOOK FOR WRITING CASES

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I believe that the best way to write a good case can be summarized as:

- Do a little bit of pre-planning to sketch out the very basics of your case in bullet point form. What's the crime? Who's the criminal? How does your story open? What new events happen each day to propel the case forward? Don't overthink it or overcomplicate it, you just need a skeleton.
- Bang out a *terrible* first draft as fast as you can, in the form of individual scenes, writing them in whatever order you like, with as much or as little detail as necessary to keep forward momentum -- avoiding the temptation to slow down to solve problem issues. Your goal here is *not* to write anything good or even to build a strong foundation. Your goal is simply to get a collection of scenes that you can iterate.
- Once the forest draft is done, then you begin an iterative process of going through scenes, refining the plot, the clues, the dialog, layering on personality and humor, adding red herrings and side cases, adjusting difficulty. All the good stuff.

Step 0 - Play a sample case and see how it's built

The first thing you should do before starting to write your own case is to *play* the Demo case for New York Noir called "**The Past is a Crooked Game**." This is a short case that will give you not just a feel for how a New York Noir game plays, but allow you to look at the "source text" of the game, so you can see exactly what the author of a case actually writes that gets converted into a finished pdf. Of course more experience playing games like Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective is always helpful in terms of understanding what makes a compelling story.

Step 1 - The most important thing to remember: Just start writing

In my opinion, the largest obstacle to writing a case is feeling overwhelmed because there are too many moving parts and details to figure out. The result is that you feel paralyzed and can't make progress or even get started, thinking that you have to "figure everything out first" before you can actually get started writing your case. This is a mistake. I believe the solution is letting go of having to figure things out ahead of time. JUST. START. WRITING. YOUR. CASE.

It is impossible and counter-productive to try to figure everything out ahead of time. Just start writing and plotting as you go, and your case will fill out as you work on it, iteratively refining it as you edit it.

Even if you did manage to plan your entire case out completely down to the exact details about every little clue and where it will be found, you will not be able to write finished polished leads and dialog one at a time, because of all the interdependency between scenes.

A finished case will require you to make lots of edits and refinements and changes in multiple passes. It is completely unproductive to try to plan it all out completely ahead of time. Only when you have a big chunk of it written will you be able to go back and refine details to ensure it all works as a game.

Writing a case is about starting with a rough first draft and then **ITERATING**.

Remember. your first draft does not have to be good! Give yourself permission to write a terrible first draft. The job of the first draft is simply to give you something concrete to build on.

Start simple, don't worry about your case not being interesting enough, or being too straightforward. Nothing is set in stone. It's exceedingly easy to add complexity to a case later. Just choose the path that lets you make progress writing entries, and the rest will take care of itself. When your basic entries are done you can start doing editing passes.

Again, don't worry yet about making a ***good*** case. You'll make your case good later, in the editing. For now just worry about writing the first rough draft. Like any good director, you'll fix it in the edit.

Step 2 - Come up with a title

A title will motivate you and provide the emotional backbone to your creative writing.

Step 3 - Decide on a detective and a time period

The main New York Noir campaign is set in the time period of the 1920s-1950s, and stars a detective named Jack Deverell, and a cast of characters that revolve around him. It is a setting that is grounded in the real history of New York. But you could invent your own detective and set them in a fictional world of your choice -- perhaps even a supernatural world, etc.

Step 4 - Understand the structure of a New York Noir (Casebook) game

When you are thinking about your case, it's helpful to keep in mind the overall organizational structure of a Casebook game like New York Noir, which is organized into the following sections:

- **Days**: A case is structured as a sequence of virtual days. Each day has some introductory text (with the main introduction to the case occurring on day 1), and some ending text that the player reads at the end of the day.
- **Leads**: Here is where the overwhelming bulk of your writing will go. Each lead represents what the player reads when they visit a location (or make a choice). You might think of leads as "***scenes***". Each location/lead/scene is typically identified by a directory lead number, and typically takes place at a specific location and involves talking with a specific person.
- **Documents:** Documents are typically full-page items that the player will gain access to during the case, and may want to refer back to while they are playing. You could always put the content of a document inside the lead where it was discovered, but it can be helpful to have all documents at the back of the casebook (or in a separate envelope) so that players can more easily reference and re-read them.
- **Hints:** The hint section is a special section where you may write many small hint text paragraphs, each tied to a specific concept or tag/marker, so that players can look up hints when they get stuck.
- **Questions, Answers, and Epilogue:** At the end of a game case, players will answer a set of questions, then check their answers to calculate their score, and read an epilogue.
- **Walkthrough** and **Behind-the-scenes**: Ideally you'll also provide a step-by-step bullet point list of how the case could have been solved and an essay talking about your process writing the case. I will discuss later why writing a Walkthrough can be especially useful.

Step 5 - Organize your case into acts/days

A good trick to structuring a case is to think of it in terms of a number of acts (days). Decide how many virtual days will be in your case, and sketch out your case in terms of acts spread over days.

The typical 3-act structure of a story can be thought of as "The Setup, the Confrontation, and the Resolution", so a natural thing would be to break your case into 3 days.

To make a compelling case, you will want to structure your days so that there are "events" or "reveals" that happen at the start (or end) of each day.

If your case is "ongoing" (contemporaneous with the player's investigation), then the daily events may involve actions taken by the culprit or suspects (e.g. killing a witness, etc.). If it's a cold case, the events may relate to the gathering or analysis of evidence (e.g. the fingerprint analysis is finished and identifies a suspect). Try to structure your case so that the daily events create an exciting pace.

Step 6 - Write up a bullet point list of the timeline and key facts of case

It's helpful to sketch out as briefly and concisely as possible what "really happened" at the core of your case. This doesn't have to be the final solution, and it can leave out most of the details. You are just trying to produce a chronological bullet point list of facts. You can embellish and add plot lines later.

Ideally if you have structured your case into multiple days with ongoing events and developments, it will make sense to structure your bullet point list of facts into days.

If you aren't sure yet what the main facts are at the core of your mystery, don't overthink it! Just dash off a few simple boring facts, for example:

- Day 1 (jan 2nd, 1935):
    - Joe Smith is an office worker, unhappy and in financial trouble.
    - He decides to rob his boss by breaking into the office safe after work.
    - He is caught by guard on his way out and kills him.
    - He hides the stolen money and the gun in his girlfriend's house.
- Day 2 (jan 2nd, 1935):
    - Joe Smith's girlfriend threatens to turn him in, so he kills her.
    - As reported in newspaper, the body of the girlfriend washes ashore on the morning of day 2.

We are not trying to add flavor or personality at this point, but rather to as concisely as possible list the main facts of the case that the player will have to eventually reconstruct.

It may be tempting to think that you need a complicated convoluted case with subplots and side stories, but in this first pass we should prefer to err on the side of keeping things as simple as possible for now.

Start simple! It is easy and natural to embellish and add details and side-plots later. They will come naturally. It is far more likely that trying to add too much at the start will paralyze and

overwhelm us. You can update your bullet point as you go. Remember, the secret is ITERATING. Start simple, and layer on complexity later.

Step 7 - (Briefly) Outline each day

When we think about writing our case, we will think in terms of "scenes", and we will lean into the idea of using days to create an overarching structure.

So, for each day of our case, we will create an outline by writing a sentence or two about the opening scene of the day, and any ending scene for the day. Not all days will have ending scenes, but all days should have a starting scene.

- The starting scene of the first day is the opening scene of your entire case.
- The starting scenes of subsequent days will tell the players about any events and developments that happened over night.
- Days can have ending scenes which act as kind of late-night interludes; typically we will want to present the players with some exclusive choices to make (for example who to ask out on a date).
- The ending scene of the last day will be the finale/wrap-up/epilogue.

When you sketch out scenes, do not worry about writing the final finished scene, but try to sketch out what key facts will be presented to the player. One of the ways that we try to make New York Noir cases engaging and control the pacing is by having exciting events that occur at the start of each day. Organizing your case into days with events that occur at the start (and sometimes end) of each day, allows you to create an exciting pace for your case.

Events at the start and end of each day might reveal new information and evidence to the player's attention, or might bring about the death of an important character, or some consequences to the player's investigation.

Step 8 - Write the scenes that inspire you

It can feel overwhelming trying to construct a big convoluted mystery with so many moving parts. Our strategy for avoiding feeling overwhelmed and paralyzed is to simply jump in and start writing the key scenes that we see in our heads.

You may have a few key scenes in your mind, where you have a feeling for how the dialog will go, or what will happen. So, write your first draft of these scenes, in a stream of consciousness manner, writing whatever comes to you.

As you do, you may find that the story changes, that characters think for themselves, and things go in a direction you didn't anticipate. That's ok.

Step 9 - Write placeholders for scenes as you go

I have suggested that you work on writing whatever scenes most inspire you. But as you begin writing scenes, you will find other lead locations or characters that will suggest themselves and need to be eventually written. Don't worry about writing those leads immediately (unless you are inspired to do so), but make placeholder entries for them, creating a blank lead with the lead id or just a placeholder id. You might just write a little note in that lead reminding yourself of its significance.

What you are doing is creating placeholders for leads that you will eventually fill in. One lead will suggest another and before you know it your case will start writing itself.

Filling in these placeholder leads is something you can take care of like a snack when you are avoiding writing more substantial leads. It's a great way to make steady progress when you feel like you only have enough energy or will power to do a small amount of work on your case, just pick an unfinished placeholder lead and write it. The more placeholders you add the more options you have when you want to do a little work on your case -- just pick the lowest hanging fruit and write that entry.

Step 10 - Filling In

One of the differences between a case that feels polished and professional and one that feels unfinished is that in a polished case there are (short) entries for lots of locations that players *might* think to visit that aren't important locations for your case. It can be frustrating when players think of a place that might be useful to them but don't find an entry for it in the case book. It is far better to anticipate places that players might want to go, and create a short entry for that location. I call this "***filling in***". One of the main purposes of playtesting is to learn about locations that you need to add entries for.

Step 11 - Write Questions

Once you've got your first draft written, you'll be in a good position to figure out what questions to challenge the player to answer when they finish your case.

As you write out these questions, and think about their answers, something magical will happen. You will find yourself in the perfect situation to CHANGE elements of the story and the mystery, and add red herrings.

Step 12 - Revise

With a first draft of the questions and the scenes written, it will become much clearer which questions are too easy or too hard, and how you can add flourishes and tweaks to point in various directions, and relating to the questions you've drafted.

You may find that the person you thought was going to be an accomplice actually works better as an innocent victim, and vice versa. Having the first draft and then beginning to fill in around it, will make it possible for you to see all sorts of possibilities that you never would have thought of if you had tried to plot it all out ahead of time. And having an evolving set of explicit questions makes it much easier for you to analyze your scenes and see where you are giving too much, or not enough, away.

One major structural kind of revision you may find yourself doing after your first draft is moving events around between days, to control pace and tension.

It cannot be overestimated how much having a first draft will open up all sort of interesting and clever ways you can develop the case, plant clues, and construct a more satisfying plot. With your first draft you will have a set of characters and scenes which will command your attention and insist on themselves, and almost write the best parts of your case on their own.

But after the first draft is where all the fun is. This is where you layer on the humor, tune up your clues, add red herrings, add some personality to the dialog, etc.

The Most Important Magic Trick

I cannot overemphasize how crucial this trick is of getting a messy bad first draft down and then iteratively refining leads (scenes). There is simply no way to see the possibilities of your case until you have a first draft. With the scenes sketched out and in place, no matter how poorly written, an entirely different world of possibilities opens up for subtlety, personality, humor, cleverness. It is possible to write a great individual powerful scene during your first draft, but the best stuff, the subtle stuff, the tiny little changes that take it to the next level, that will only happen when you have a draft that you can quickly fine tune during revisions.

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

How much planning and plotting should I do ahead of time?

Some authors like to plan a case out extensively before they start writing, spending a lot of time creating an outline. Other authors just start writing and see where the case takes them.

Where you fall on this spectrum comes down to personal preference. When I said earlier to "just start writing" I didn't mean that you shouldn't outline a plot and plan out your case. What I mean is that you shouldn't allow yourself to get slowed down by feeling like you need to figure out all the details before you start writing your case.

Feel free to create an outline, and plan out your case in whatever detail allows you to make fast progress. But if and when you find your planning process start to slow down, and you start finding it hard to make progress on your outline/plot or hard to keep from changing your mind about the plot, then I think you need to transition to start sketching out a first draft of your scenes and start filling in content.

Don't worry about subtle clues in your first draft

Here's the thing: It's counterproductive to try to craft the perfectly written clue during your first draft. You may know that in a certain scene you want to very subtly hint that a suspect may be palming the poison capsule in his hand, but it will only be when the rest of your scenes are sketched out that you will know how much of a clue to provide in this scene. Think of your scenes as each having little dials that you can adjust depending on how obvious or subtle the clues in that scene should be, and what details should be revealed in each scene. First you need to construct the set of scenes and see which dials you have access to. Once that's accomplished you can start fine tuning the dials as you revise the text.

Think of Day Introductions as Unlocking Threads of Investigation

Your case is divided into multiple days in order to create an exciting pace and arc.

The main way that you take advantage of this structure is by introducing, or **unlocking**, new information at the start of each day.

This might take the form of some event being revealed that happened overnight, or some new analysis of evidence that is delivered in the morning, or a copy of the newspaper from the new day, filled with new information.

It may be just a tiny hint of a thread that gives the player a single new location to visit which itself suggests further follow-up places to visit. Or it could be, as might be the case with a newspaper, a large number of new threads for the player to pull at.

Final questions

When the player gets to the end of your case, you will generally want to have them answer some questions to see how well they understood the case. I think there are two basic strategies here.

The traditional SHCD approach is to ask very specific questions with very specific answers (e.g. “What is the name of the murderer”). The advantage of this approach is that the answers can be provided at the end very simply, and you can provide the player with a clear score per

correct answer. One disadvantage to this approach is that often the nature of the question can reveal (leak) information. For example a question like "Who was pretending to be the prince?" tells the player that the prince was an imposter, something they may not have figured out. Another disadvantage of this approach is that it is often impossible or impractical to score players or subtle observations and details.

A more flexible approach, which I favor, is to allow more open-ended final questions, such as "What was really going on with the Prince, and what evidence do you have to prove it?". This lets the player come up with a complete complex explanation in their own head (or on paper). One disadvantage to this comes in the scoring. The solution in this case is to simply describe the full context of the answer/story and then ask the player to rate THEIR explanation/understanding, on a scale from 1 to 10, for example. Some players may not like the subjectivity involved in doing this, but I find it an appropriate exercise for these kinds of mysteries.

Writing an effective epilogue

In traditional SHCD-like cases, the ending of a case is simply an explanation of what actually happened -- often narrated by Sherlock Holmes or a similar expert. This has the strong benefit of simplicity.

In New York Noir we sometimes want to go for a less passive and more dynamic ending. One major way this is done in New York Noir is that we (often) tell the story of the solution/epilogue through a series of newspaper story excerpts that span the days, weeks, and months after the case ends. This has some benefits:

- It shifts the storytelling from a first person perspective to a third person, and the newspaper can talk about some of the things that happened from a different perspective.
- It offers us a way to use a variety of voices and points of view.. A newspaper article can have commentary by the writer, quotes from the police, trial transcripts so we can hear from the suspects, family, or even from ourselves being quoted in the paper, which may be particularly enjoyable. We may also be able to hear from the suspect or criminals.
- It allows us to offer an epilogue that spans days, weeks, months, or even YEARS after the conclusion of the case. This is done naturally with excerpts from newspapers at different points in time after the case.
- It allows us to support endings that are ambiguous in terms of ground truth. This does run the risk of being unsatisfying to the player, and should be used sparingly.
- The newspaper epilogue excerpts allow us to write our ending in small chunks that are more manageable.
- Telling an epilogue of WHAT HAPPENED AFTER the case, rather than simply providing an explanation for what happened DURING the case, allows us to have branching alternate epilogues that depend on the players answers and what they discovered. Perhaps the player decided to arrest the wrong person -- we could have newspaper excerpts describing how the person was found innocent and the real culprit got away, etc.
- Writing an epilogue, as opposed to a SUMMARY of what happened, allows us to frame the ending in DRAMATIC terms, ending on an exciting high note.

Building on this idea of more dynamic, branching epilogues, the end of the case is a perfect opportunity to give the player some final choices to make -- in addition to answering questions.

The decisions may be very consequentially related to the case (who to arrest), or merely narrative (does the player want to ask the innocent suspect out on a date?)

Think of information in terms of Markers

Imagine in your case that players might visit a witness before they visit the crime scene. You don't want to write how they asked the witness about some fact they could have only learned about at the crime scene. You have a couple of choices to solve this common predicament.

- You could try to structure your case so they only learn about the witness at the crime scene, so they could never end up going to visit the witness first.
- You could try to subtly and ambiguously write the witness interview scene so that the witness introduces the topic instead of the detective, so that the interview makes sense regardless of what order the player visits the leads.
- You could use a **marker** that the player receives when they visit the crime scene, which is checked at the witness lead scene -- either to tell the player that they cannot visit the witness until they find the required marker, or have them read different text depending on whether they have the marker.

When designing a case, you define **markers** that a player receives when they go to certain places and learn certain information. These are sometimes referred to in other games as **tags** or condition **letters**. Sometimes a player will visit someplace, and the game will "gate" a section depending on whether a player has found the marker for it.

A key idea in New York Noir is that the author should be free to make a difficult case with hard-to-find clues, without having to worry that some players may finish the case without ever having found these hidden clues. **Required markers** and **hints** are a major way this is achieved.

In New York Noir an author can specify certain **required** tags that **must** be found **before the end of a given day**. In this way, the player cannot progress the story past a certain point without having visited certain leads.

There may be situations where, you as the author will want to ensure that a specific lead is visited before the end of the case, but won't care what day it is found -- in that case the marker will have a deadline of being found on the final day.

But in other situations, for pacing reasons, or storytelling necessity, you will have locations/leads that you NEED the player to find on or before a given day. For example, if you want to ensure that the player talks to a witness on day 1, because the witness will be killed on day 2.

For every marker that you **require** to be found, you need to provide a **hint** entry where the player can get help (at a cost of demerits) for finding that marker. This is key, because the player will be stuck until they find it, and you need to provide a way for them to be told where to go if they need it.

I recommend you **not** try to figure out which leads are required and by what deadline, until the very end of writing your case. At that point you will have a better idea for the pace of the game and which leads are critical for the player to find.

Using mutually exclusive choices and late night leads

In a traditional Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective style game, there may be no decisions for the player to make other than in what order to go places, and such decisions have no impact on the gameplay.

As a New York Noir author, you should try to force the player to make tough moral/psychological decisions often (at least twice over the course of your game; maybe once per day?). These decisions can take several forms, and it is fine if the consequences of such decisions are entirely narrative.

One kind of decision you can force the player to make is to choose one mutually exclusive option from among two or more. This could be as simple as choosing to talk to character A or character B, but not both. Or it could be as weighty as choosing to save character A or character B from a life or death situation. It is not necessary that the player's decision have far reaching branching storyline consequences that ripple throughout the game -- as long as the impact of the decision is felt emotionally by the player.

When the player is faced with a decision, it is important that they are able to make an informed decision, that they be able to reason about it, that they be able to have a reasonable debate about the consequences of their choices, and agonize over them. You do not want to give a player a choice between opening two random doors A and B, since they have no basis for making an informed decision.

I find myself drawn to decisions which are meaningful but have no clear good or bad outcome. But if you ever do want to have a decision that has choices where one leads to a good outcome and another leads to a bad outcome, there should be a much higher burden on ensuring that the player has seen enough clues beforehand that they should be able to figure out the "right" choice.

Writing good "Late Night" Leads

You should always be looking for a way to create choices that the player is forced to make. These choices may take different forms:

- Moral/psychological choices without a correct answer.
- Relationship building choices which affect which characters in the game the player gets closer to.
- Choices that reward clever players based on their understanding / intuitions.
- Choices that affect which mystery threads get unraveled early vs late.

It may occasionally make sense to stage these choice points at arbitrary locations -- especially if you want to force the player to make a tough split-second decision.

But a great place to put such choices is at the end of each day. In fact we have a special name for the story sections and choices the player reads between days: **Late Night Leads**.

At the end of each day of the case, it's good to give your players a little change of pace, by giving them a choice to make to wrap up the day.

If it's an investigatory choice (which suspect should be tailed over night? What piece of evidence should be forensically examined?), then you can provide the results at the start of the next day. This helps create tension, and a sense of time passing.

Including Side Cases

One of the hallmarks of some of the best mystery cases is the presence of one or two "**side cases**" that the player might solve on their way to solving the main case.

A side case is like a short little mini-mystery. Often they "solve themselves" during the process of chasing down leads for the main case, in the sense that players may end up stumbling upon and reading all the leads related to the side case while trying to solve the main case.

Typically there will be a (low scoring) question at the end of the case about each side case.

Why are side cases so satisfying?

- The player who is a completionist is rewarded for their diligence.
- The player who is in a rush can ignore them.
- Side cases act like red herrings; they add a layer of mystery that must be disentangled from the main threads.
- Side cases create a sense of satisfaction along the way to solving the larger main case, giving players a sense of accomplishment along the way.
- Side cases reward people for doing some activities that can otherwise feel unrewarding (such as reading through all of the newspaper stories,etc)
- They offer an opportunity to create some comedic relief.
- They make a case feel more epic and larger in scope.

Side cases and newspaper articles are the perfect thing to add after your first draft, when you have a better idea of what days need filling out, and where you can weave in a little tangent story for comedic relief.

Side cases are also great because you can add **secondary questions** about them that aren't particularly deep or clever, but are more about rewarding the players who visited the extra leads that involve them. SIde cases also work great as red herrings because they can be their own little standalone mini-mysteries, which the player will not immediately be able to determine is unrelated to their main case.

Best of all, writing side cases is fun and easy!

Bottlenecks, Chains, and Wide Lead Patterns

A good case will present players with a variety of patterns in terms of how leads are connected. At the extremes we might think of these patterns as being on a scale from "**wide**" to "**deep**".

If the player discovers an address book with the names of 10 suspects, this would be considered a "**wide and shallow**" set of leads -- it's a list of leads that can be visited in any order, one after another, none of which take much deduction to follow up on. It can sometimes feel overwhelming or like busywork if there are too many leads to follow up on at one time. You don't want to design a game where the player is given right from the start of the game a list if 50

leads to visit, and simply needs to put together the key information from each of these places to solve the mystery.

On the other hand, if we have scattered multiple clues to the location in various scenes, and the player has to put these all together in order to deduce the one hideout location, which itself is packed with further clues that can only be found at that location, then we can think of this as a "**bottleneck**". Bottlenecks are very enjoyable for the player.

This works best if the player can feel that there is some place they want to find, but can't quite figure out how to get there. Anticipation is a very powerful feeling.

One of the more enjoyable experiences playing a mystery game is feeling like you are running out of leads as you struggle to make progress, and then figuring out something important which leads to getting past a bottleneck and opening up new clue threads and locations.

On the other hand, be wary of creating simple deep chains of leads. If a player is simply following a single obvious sequence of leads to some inexorable conclusion, where each lead specifies one and only one next lead to visit, the game can feel like it is on autopilot and not requiring any deduction on the part of the player.

Ideally you will be able to craft situations where players alternate between having a wide set of clues to choose from, and facing bottlenecks that temporarily stump them. Try to find ways to make the player feel like there is some information they want that they don't know how to get, and make them work to "unlock" it.

Using Tag/Marker Deadlines

One key way that tags(markers) can be used by you to maintain some control over your case is by setting deadlines on them. When you say that a certain tag must be found by the end of day 2, the player will not be able to move to day 3 until they find it, even if that requires them entering a kind of overtime state.

This is a very powerful tool for ensuring that certain story beats happen that you may need to happen in order to pace your days, and have morning and late night story events make sense.

However, remember that just because the player COULD stumble on a certain lead on day 1, doesn't mean you should necessarily make it a requirement that they do.

Ideally, you will set deadlines for markers to be as late in the game as you can possibly put them, to give players maximum flexibility and agency regarding the order in which they visit places. If you can, set a deadline for a maker to be on the final day of the case. Only set earlier deadlines if your storytelling will suffer or become to convoluted if they fail to visit a certain place before a certain day.

Work on your End Case Question List as You Go

At the end of the case you will challenge the player to answer a set of questions. Maintain a list of such questions as you write. As you write, questions will occur to you to ask the player at the end of the case. Sometimes as you come up with these questions, you will get ideas to reshape clues to make the questions easier or harder.

As you develop and refine your list of end-game questions, this list will help guide you in creating clues. As you write your questions you also get a better feel for the difficulty of your case and whether the mysteries are compelling.

Using Open Ended Questions

Don't hesitate to use open ended questions, and ask the player to score themselves. For example "Describe what really happened in the Restaurant" and then in the answer section you would give your answer, and then say something like "Assign yourself up to 10 points based on how well your answer matches the solution." This allows you to ask more interesting deeper questions than simple multiple choice questions.

Questions that Leak Information

Don't be too afraid about leaking information in your questions. Let's say you have a case about a husband who murdered his wife, and you want to ask the player to identify the murder weapon. You might find yourself reluctant to ask it like "What weapon did Mr.Brown use to kill his wife?" because a voice in the back of your head says that this question would give away the fact that he killed her and maybe the player didn't figure that out. If your aim is to make figuring that out a key part of the mystery, then that's fair. But if you really want most players to have concluded that already in order to get to the more interesting mysteries, and more importantly, if failing to figure that out is going to cause them to get every other follow up question wrong and be unhappy reading the solution because they missed the most important part, then just go ahead and ask it like that and "give away" (leak) that the husband murdered his wife in the question. The rare player who didn't realize that before reading the question will have an "ah ha" moment right then and there, and be happy to have an opportunity to rethink the case before proceeding.

Primary vs Secondary Questions

At the end of a case, there are typically PRIMARY (main) questions, and SECONDARY questions. The (unspoken) contract you should make with players is that by the time they get to the end, the fact that they have seen all of the REQUIRED markers should enable them to come up with reasonable answers to the PRIMARY questions.

On the other hand, SECONDARY questions may depend on optional leads that are not required. If the player didn't find them, they may not be able to answer them correctly/confidently. That's fair. Just make sure that secondary questions are not as important, and that the player won't be too sad about getting them wrong. Secondary questions often cover optional minor side plots and stories.

Varying Lead Entry Sizes

One technique for creating a fun and satisfying case is by "rewarding" the player with an occasional long scene that is full of information to chew on. Like many things in life, there is such a thing as too much of a good thing. Not every lead should be super long. Vary the size of your leads. Mix in lots of short ones, with an occasional rewarding long one. Finding such leads can be an exciting moment for a player, and it often makes sense to make the length of a lead proportional to how much work the player had to do to find it. Other places where a long detailed lead makes sense would be at the scene of a crime or case introduction.

Crafting Solutions, Controlling Difficulty, and Offering Competing Theories

There are competing approaches to designing cases. Some authors like to design cases so that it's hard for players to figure out all of the leads to visit and read, but if they do, they will understand easily what happened. Other authors prefer to design a case where it's easy to figure out all of the leads to visit but will have to make a difficult leap of logic to actually understand the mystery of the case, and where many players will guess wrongly.

At both of these extremes, it can be very hard for an author to control the difficulty of a case.

In my opinion, a middle ground between these two extremes works best. New York Noir uses a system of required markers to avoid the situation where a player misses critical leads. In this way, New York Noir cases are designed so that all players should see the most significant leads by the time they get to the end. And a hint system is available to help ensure this.

Having control over what critical leads all players will see, the author can craft a mystery that is somewhat challenging to solve even after seeing all of this information.

I think a final mystery works best when:

- Ideally there is only one clear explanation that makes sense of ALL of the facts of the case; ideally it should be hard to conceive of but create an "ah ha" moment when players do.
- Ideally the player should feel conflicting between multiple partial theories of the case that the player must reject or rule out. If there are multiple plausible explanations, only one should be clearly more likely (from a psychological or alibi standpoint).
- A solution that requires the player to reason about the psychology of a suspect can be very rewarding and add another element to the case.

The Appeal of Inexplicable Facts

One of my favorite techniques for creating a satisfying "ah ha" moment and motivating players to struggle to solve a case is to present seemingly inexplicable clues or details. There is something about a strange inexplicable detail that is irresistible:

- Strange marks at the crime scene.
- A strange comment by a suspect.
- Behavior of a key person of interest that doesn't make sense.

Such elements can propel the players through the case, forever searching for some explanation that is just out of grasp. Just remember that as much as the inexplicable fact motivated the player to keep searching for answers, that's how much they will want a satisfying explanation at the end.

Use Comments

Programmers are well accustomed to the idea of leaving comments in their code, but writers tend to notes in separate documents. Get into the habit of using comments in your casebook source text so that you can keep them close to where they are relevant.

During these early days of New York Noir, it's useful to keep track of any directory details that your case depends on.

The storybook building tool for New York Noir will automatically identify any places or people explicitly used in your case and output a list of them, so that we can ensure that if we ever do upgrade the official directories, we can make sure that the people and places used in your case are carried over to any future new directory releases. If you have an entry for a person or a place, nothing further is needed to ensure those will always be in future versions of the directories.

However, there may be certain details that your case relies on that are implicit. For example, perhaps your case absolutely depends on there being only 1 person in the directory with the last name "Millford".. Or perhaps your case depends on the idea that there is no department store in a certain region. Keep a list of these facts in your notes so that they can be seen by those responsible for upgrading the New York Noir directories.

Getting into the Flow of Writing Dialog

In my limited experience writing mystery game cases for New York Noir, I find it very hard to get started writing a case, and hard to get back into it if I haven't been doing it for a while. Its very hard to get into the groove/flow. Eventually it gets a little easier to hear the different character voices in your head.

Playtesting

You may wonder how you will know when your case is ready for playtesting. Unfortunately, playtesting cases for mystery games is difficult, because they can really only be played through once, and because there is only a small potential audience of people willing to playtest a mystery game. For this reason, I encourage you to not try to find playtesters for your case until you yourself have thoroughly revised and edited it and done your best to make it a polished game. Don't waste the limited resource of playtesters until you've improved the game as much as you can and you need real feedback about it.

Playtest your full case several times:

- Maximally efficient playtest: Go to the fewest leads that let you solve the case; see how long it takes you; record your steps for a walkthrough. Ask yourself how much time needs to be in your day (governed by default lead times and start & end day times), to allow people to visit all of these and a handful of red herrings, contacts, etc.
- Maximally inefficient playtest: Try to break the case by doing to the wrong places in illogical orders.

The Value of a Walkthrough

Having a full walkthrough at the end of your case, which shows the player exactly what leads they could have visited in what order (and how to figure out what leads to go to), is a great thing for players who finish your case and want to see how they should have solved it optimally. But it's also an extremely useful resource for you and playtesters to see how long it takes to play the case. You will be able to use this walkthrough to quickly simulate a playthrough of your case, and make sure it "works". Going through the walkthrough will also show you how much spare time is available on each day -- a good rule of thumb might be to allow at least double the amount of time needed to play optimally to allow the player to visit other places.

Brushes with History

One of the main appeals of a game like Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective or New York Noir, is what I call Time Travel Tourism. This is the feeling that these games give you of being a time traveler, occasionally visiting real places and occasionally crossing path with real people from history.

If you want to take your case to the next level, try to give the player an occasional brush with a famous location or person or event from history.

New York Noir is filled with real places that existed in New York City in the 1920s-1950s. Many of those locations are illustrated and labeled in the map atlas. If you do use one of those locations you can even include a larger version of the building art in your casebook document at that location. You might also use real newspaper stories from the days your case is set (Casebook includes functions to make nice looking newspapers); there are online websites where you can search for newspaper archives on any given day, like the New York Times Time Machine.

And while you probably don't want to give famous people from the past major roles in your case, it can be fun for players to brush shoulders with them occasionally. Perhaps a scene where the player visits a certain venue and hears a famous orator speak, or a brief interaction with a real life crime scene boss, or just have the players spot a celebrity while visiting a restaurant. Don't forget, New York City is a playground of the rich and famous.

Adding brushes with historical figures and celebrities is the perfect thing to leave for after your first draft and playtesting.

How long should my case be?

There are no hard and fast rules. Some people prefer short games and some people prefer longer games (personally for me the longer the better). In the end, you'll only know how long your game will really take to play once playtesters start trying it.

However, you can look at the statistics that the Casebook tool gives you to get a rough idea of game length. Here are some stats for two different casebook games:

> The demo case, "**The Past is a Crooked Game**" has: 62 Leads / 10.6k Words / 60.7 KB. The demo case should be considered a short case that may take players 1-2 hours to play.
>
> My longer case, "**The Wrong Book**" has: 215 Leads / 27.7k Words / 171.7 KB. That case typically takes players 4-6 hours to play, which can require two play sessions.
>
> My new super long case, "**Foxtrot East**" has: 349 Leads / 18 Docs / 36 Markers / 21 Images / 7 Days / 54.3k Words (159 avg.) / 363.9 KB. That case would probably take 8+ hours to play.
>
> The large standalone expansion "**Adventures by Gaslight**" for SHCD has approximately 143 leads, but they are on average substantially longer than the leads in the other two.

These are very rough estimates -- play time can vary dramatically based on how many optional leads are written that most players will not visit.

Crafting the Opening Scene

The introductory scene in a mystery case holds special importance:

- It sets the tone and captures the reader's interest.
- It is a seduction. It should convey the style of the writing to come, the unique personality of your protagonist, and entice the reader with some mysterious question that they will want to know the answer to.
- It's the start of a contract. It conveys to the player the flavor of the case.
- Try to start with an opening paragraph that conveys the character of your detective.
- A compelling opening scene will introduce some strange fact(s) or details that defy easy explanation, or create a sense of curiosity in the reader.
- The reader should feel like they must continue reading to get some resolution.

Humor as a Window Into Personality

I believe humor is one of the best ways to illustrate the personality of your protagonist and to express your style as a writer. Look for ways to convey your lead character's personality by showing their sense of humor.

Bad ways to Add Difficulty

There are ways you can make a case more difficult that will not be appreciated by players. Most of these fall under a general category of producing cognitive overload. Cognitive overload happens when the player cannot keep track of or keep in mind all the details, so they can't even reason about them. At some point if you overload your reader, they will simply give up and conclude that the facts are too convoluted or numerous, or the permutations to great, and they will simply shut down.

A concrete example of this happens if you create a large cast of characters who are not differentiable and have similar names. If the reader has trouble keeping track of who said and did what, not only will they not be invested in those characters, but they may very well give up on those characters, and just consider them too much trouble to reason about.

There is an art to balancing difficulty, and it's a subject I will return to in more detail later. But one pitfall you might want to avoid is providing a critical but tiny and subtle clue hidden deep within a long text lead, that you expect the player to have to chew on and re-reread several times to understand. If there is some detail that you think the player will need to return to again and again, the ideal mechanical solution is to put that information in a "document", because documents are things that players can easily refer to and re-read during the course of the case.

If you do decide to hide some important information inside a normal lead, try to make the lead one that contains other interesting information to make it easier and more likely for the player to return to that lead and re-read it (for example the scene of the crime or an interview with a compelling witness).

How Unique Does my Case Need to be?

Don't worry about whether your case is unique or has already been done.

Such worries are a recipe for writer's block. Just let yourself write the case, and copy as much as you want from other sources and don't worry about being different.

You will find that after the first draft, your case will evolve in different directions and distinguish itself. One small change will have a ripple effect and before you know it your case will be unique.

In fact it wouldn't be a crazy idea to write your first draft as a direct copy of something that already exists (movie, book, previous case).. Such a draft could provide you a good foundation, and AFTER the first draft, it WILL evolve in new directions.

Writing Newspapers

- Don't try to add real-world stories to your paper in your first draft, because you may decide to change the dates of your case. Just write stories with clues relevant for your case. You can fill in space with real world articles afterwards.
- Don't worry about writing filler stories; you can do that at the end when you know how much space you need to fill up.
- Don't worry about writing the final wording of your stories. Just like writing leads, just write a first draft of your articles with the main points; you can flesh them out later.
- Use the Casebook newspaper functions to make nice looking newspapers. It will also help you adjust spacing to fill out the papers to the write size.
- Consider whether you want to make a full page newspaper, which should be placed as a document at the back of the book, or as a simple short excerpt provided inline with the text (typically in an introduction). There are separate newspaper and formatting functions for both of these.

A Philosophy of Required Markers

One area where we wanted to evolve the design of cases from SHCD involved difficulty. We wanted to figure out a way to:

- Give the author better control over the difficulty of a case.
- Make it easier for authors to write more difficult cases that were not frustrating.
- Avoid the situation where the player ends their case but completely misses visiting some crucial needle-in-a-haystack lead that is essential to answering a key question.

New York Noir cases aim to accomplish that by the use of "**required**" markers:

- In New York Noir (Casebook) cases, there are REQUIRED markers that MUST be found by the player on each day (and at end of case).
- The author should ensure that IFF the player has visited all of the REQUIRED markers (not necessarily all markers), then the player will have seen at least the bare minimum "essential" leads needed to "solve" the case.
- That doesn't mean the case will be easy if they only see those required leads, but it does mean that they won't feel they missed out on an essential element of the case.
- In addition, as an author you can make it as hard as you like to find these required leads, creating deductive puzzles that the player must solve to figure out how to find them, knowing that the player will be able to take hints to find them, and cannot end the game until they do.
- And knowing that all players will see all of these essential leads, you can make the case as hard as you like to figure out even after having visited all required leads, confident that the player can shift to trying to deduce the case from what they have read, rather than worrying that there is some essential that they never saw. A major source of

frustration for players is wondering when they have seen enough to figure out what happened. This system is designed to eliminate this source of frustration.
- Another nice thing you can do for players who like to be completionists is tell them before the very end of the case what other (non-required) markers can be found if they want to keep looking for them. Completionists will appreciate this.

Tips for Writing Scenes

Most of your scenes will be short and punchy. I think there are some tips, tricks, and guidelines that can be useful:

- Variety is your friend! One of the enjoyable parts of a travel/directory mystery game is experiencing a variety of leads -- some short, some long, some funny, some serious, some that feel like an action thriller, and some that are slow, etc.
- You might start a scene with the player character approaching the building and observing its physical details. ('I walked up the wide stone steps of the Chase Manhattan bank and pulled open the heavy glass doors…'
- Or you might start a scene in mid-conversation, only pulling back after the first lines of dialog to explain who is being talked to. ('"He was in here last week asking for a loan!" said the banker on duty at Chase bank.')
- Some scenes can be almost entirely dialog.
- Other scenes can just summarize what was said without any dialog ('The teller at Chase Bank tells me Mr. Brown had been in last week asking for a loan, but can't offer any more details.')
- You can end a scene without describing the player leaving. Sometimes you may want to describe the protagonist walking out of a scene location, but it's also fine to end a scene after a line of dialog and let the reader imagine how the scene would wrap up.
- Stick to a consistent TENSE. Most New York Noir cases are written ***First Person, Present Tense*** (e.g. 'I walk through the door and lean over to see what she's writing in her notebook.'), but you could write your case however you wish. Just keep the tense and perspective consistent.
- When editing/proofreading/revising, read the scene out loud, make sure it "sounds" right.

Recommended Mystery Writing Books and Essays

- Will Storr ("The Science of Storytelling") - jesse favorite
- James N. Frey ("How to Write a Damn Good Mystery") - jesse favorite
- Hallie Ephron ("Writing and Selling Your Mystery Novel Revised and Expanded Edition") - jesse favorite
- Larry Beinhart ("How to Write a Mystery")
- "How to Write a Mystery" anthology ed. By Lee Child (just ok)
- "Howdunit: A Masterclass in Crime Writing" anthology ed. By Martin Edwards (just ok)
- There is also no better way to see what good leads look like than by playing "Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective" games; I recommend the box by Dave Neal ("The Baker Street Irregulars")

Editing Your Case: Adding style, personality, humor, etc.

After you get a first draft done, that's the perfect time to start layering in some style, personality, and humor to your leads.

From my experience, adding flair and personality after you've written a first draft, while reading through your text, is orders of magnitude smoother than trying to get the tone right while you are writing your first draft, because you can read through your entire case and see how it flows, and get a feel for how it sounds all put together. You'll have a much better feel for pacing and personality when you are able to read through everything, and you'll have a much better feel for the rhythm and flow.

Do a Playtest Runthrough

Once you get your first draft done, do a little playtest by running through the case starting at day 1. Keep track of time and see how many turns it takes you to get through the day, and make sure you give the player enough time to complete it.

Here's where you'll get a much better feel for the pace and flow of the game. You can make minor changes as you play, but keep a todo list for bigger changes and notes that you want to come back to.

Keep an eye out for leads that a player might visit before you are ready for them to do so (you can add markers/tags to handle that).

One common thing you may find during your playtest is that you need to move things around between days, to lengthen some and shorten others.

Writer's Block

If you have writer's block and can't make progress on your case, here are some things you can work on:

- Write Hints for your Markers
- Write Questions and Answers
- Write short placeholder scenes for all of the New York Noir Contacts
- Write side case scenes and weird red herring scenes (just write rough drafts, you can polish them later)
- Do polishing of a scene by reading through it aloud and tweaking dialog
- Go through your case and add $logicSuggests() command to visualize your plot map
- Go through your case looking for places the player might think to go that aren't important parts of your case and add placeholder entries for them
- Create newspapers for your case and start writing small articles (important for side cases)

I also find that having hard deadlines is a great way to overcome writer's block. Do not allow yourself the luxury of putting off writing for too long in hopes of coming up with a solution to a road block. Better to write a broken scene and fix it later.

Common Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

This section describes certain pitfalls to look out for when writing a case and how to crawl out of them.

One common pitfall is when your case is too linear. What does this mean? It means that there is essentially always one new clue to follow. This creates a linear experience that feels more like reading a book than playing a game. If you imagine a case as a web of scenes (nodes) connected by the clues that lead between, then I think the most satisfying structure for a case can be seen as one where there pattern of branching varies. It's enjoyable for players to have moments where there are lots of leads to follow up on all at once, followed by periods where they are at a bottleneck and struggle to discover a single clue that will open up a new constellation of scenes to visit.

Having multiple leads that a player can follow at any given time also means they won't feel frustrated if they can't make progress on one lead, because they have something else to do if they get stuck or lost.

It's not just that they can switch paths if they get stuck on one, it's that it's a very powerful way to create a sense of discovery and mystery if players can chase down one thread ALMOST to the end but then hit a roadblock, and have to then chase down a different threat in order to get the "key" that unlocks the first thread. This pattern, of letting players go deep down one chain of leads but requiring them to switch to another lead to get the missing clue for the first, is a powerful structural "pattern" you can use.

Another thing that can create a sense of linearity and lack of agency is if your day's are structured so that the player is exposed to exactly the markers they are supposed to find on that day. In other words, in New York Noir each day has some required markers that must be found before the day must be ended -- but you shouldn't write a case where each marker can ONLY be found on a given day (the same day it is required). Better to have a more open ended structure, and use markers that can be found more flexibly, and only use REQUIREMENT DEADLINES to force the item to be found until you really need the player to have found it. Ideally most markers will be found organically BEFORE they are required..

Crafting Hint Entries

An important element of New York Noir cases is that you have HINTS available for all markers that you REQUIRE the player to discover. Without this, a player could get stuck now able to progress in the game.

When a player reads a hint, there score will be *penalized* to a small degree, which should serve as incentive enough to avoid it.

Hints do not have to be elaborately written, but there are some guidelines you should follow:

- Try to create a "sequence" (ladder) of hints for each marker, starting with the most general hint about what the marker refers to, and ending with an explicit pointer to where the marker can be found.
- Remember that tags are "obfuscated" so that the player may have no idea what the tag even refers to or what they should be looking for. So often the first hint for a tag will give them a clue of WHAT they are looking for (not how to find it).

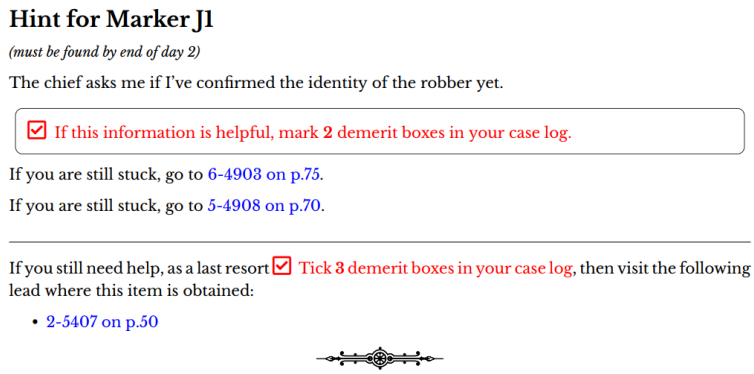
- Casebook functions exist to help you format your sequence of hits, instruct the player to mark demerits, and even point the player to the leads where the marker can be found. Check out the functions: **$inlineHint()** and **$autoHint()**. Both of these functions make writing a ladder of hints painless.
- Ideally you should write the hints from the standpoint of the the protagonist is getting advice from someone within the narrative of the game (e.g. "I ask Jewel where she thinks the man might be hiding and she suggests I look in the Laundromat"), rather than breaking the narrative by giving the hint to the player (e.g. "Your suspect could be hiding in a laundromat"). I try to write the first hint as a dialog with another character in the game -- someone from our contact list like Jewel or the chief. Subsequent hints for that maker I tend to write more briefly as the protagonist's thoughts. See below for an example.
- Watch out for issues caused by the ORDER of markers, or a player reading hints in an order you did not anticipate. For example, imagine there are two required markers on day 1, a Chicken that must be found (marker B), and the egg that the chicken laid (marker A). And imagine that the player hasn't found either of these and doesn't even know there is a chicken involved in the case. If your hint for the egg says "Did you check under the chicken's nest" and your hint for the chicken says "You are looking for a bird that cannot fly"), then you can see how if the player visits the egg hint first, they will get a spoiler about the chicken by accident. The easiest way to avoid this is make sure that markers which must be discovered in a logical order are defined in that order, so that their marker letters are sequential. This should work because players are instructed to resolve hints alphabetically. If this is impractical, or if you just want to avoid spoilers, write your hints in such a way that you start with a statement like "If you have not found x yet, first fint that before reading this hint."
- How many demerits should it cost the player to take a hint? That's up to you but generally i have them mark 1 demerit when they access a hint, where I give them the broadest suggestion of what they are looking for without giving away anything, and then 2 demerits for the next hint in the sequence, and increasing by one for each step in the sequence.
- Sometimes you'll want to add a required marker for the sole purpose of being able to provide a directed hint to it. For example, let's say that you have several clues that lead to another clue (in no particular order), like the need to talk to witnesses 1, 2, and 3, in order to put together enough info to find the location of a suspect. Now if we didn't need to write hints, we might just have a marker on the suspect lead and require that suspect lead to be found by the end of day 1. But if they need a hint finding the suspect, we won't know whether it's because they couldn't find witness 1, 2, and or 3. In this case we might be better off putting required tags on all three witness leads, so we'll know which one(s) they need help finding.
- On the other hand, if there's only a single sequence of leads that a player would have to visit to figure out some final location, you could get away with just having a single marker, with increasingly explicit hints about each step of the chain.
- You'll probably find you need to add a bunch of markers while writing hints, one for each "puzzle" that the player's need to solve.
- How much effort should you put into writing hints? Hints rescue people from having a bad time when they get stuck or lost. In general I think the harder a puzzle is to solve or a person to find, or a deduction to make, the more effort you should spend in creating a

ladder of hints that gently increase in explicitness. If it'[s a marker that you think very few people will get stuck on, you can write a briefer hint.

Here's an example hint sequence:

```
## cond.confirmJacob
The chief asks me if I've confirmed the identity of the robber yet.
$mark(demerits=2, helpful=true)
If you are still stuck, $inlineHint(demerits=2): {
        I should probably visit the scene of the crime and try to follow up on any other
        witnesses that the victim thinks may have additional information.
}
If you are still stuck, $inlineHint(demerits=2): {
        I remember that mr.X was talking suspiciously about an underground bunker..
}
$autoHint()
```

That casebook code will render something like this:



Creating a Sense of Time and Place

After you've finished your 2nd draft you'll be ready for some fine tuning.

Sprinkle in some references to the season and the weather. If it's the summer and it's hot out, that should come up occasionally. Ditto if it's winter and freezing. A handful of references throughout the case will be enough to help solidify the atmosphere of your case.

Planting Breadcrumbs in the Haystack to Overcome Discouragement

There are certain chains of clues/leads that a good player will persist in chasing down. If the player *KNOWS* that his victim was poisoned at a restaurant, and hears that it's in a certain neighborhood, then the player should be expected to have enough stamina to check the half dozen restaurants in that neighborhood to find the right one.

But there are other cases where a player might intuit that they can find a place, but need some sign that they are on the right track, or else they might give up. For example, if a player SUSPECTS that the victim was poisoned during dinner, but has no idea if they ate at home or at work or in a restaurant or at a coffee shop, and they pick a restaurant to visit and there's no entry, they might give up and conclude that there is no point searching further.

It is therefore very important in any situation where the player might become discouraged searching for a certain thing, that you create (short) entries for wrong-but-close places. Finding these places is like finding breadcrumbs of encouragement that tell the player they are on the right wavelength.

The more important it is for a player to find a needle in a haystack, and the more hidden the needle, the more important it is to have breadcrumbs sprinkled generously around the haystack.

Avoiding the Cognitive Overload of Characters

In a typical case the player is going to be meeting and talking to many different people. It can be overwhelming for the player to keep track of these different people.

As an author you may be tempted to increase the difficulty of your case by taxing the player's ability to keep track of characters. This would be a mistake. When players have a hard time remembering the names of characters or confusing characters, it creates a sense of frustration and distracts the players from being able to engage the story.

Hallie Ephron provides some tips for **naming** supporting characters:

- Don't give a character two first names (e.g. "William Thomas")
- Vary the number of syllables in the character names
- Pick names that don't sound alike
- Pick names that start with different letters

In a narrative mystery case, many characters are "on screen" only very briefly. It's therefore often important to quickly establish them as a distinctive and unique individual, by exaggerating their appearance, manner of speaking, manner of behavior, etc.

You should also mix up the way you handle characters that are only encountered in a single scene. In general, you should consider writing scenes in a way that avoids mentioning the name of any character who the player only meets ONCE (e.g., the waiter in a restaurant).

The more importance a character is to the story, the easier it should be for the player to distinguish this character from others.

Dialog Writing Tips

ATTN: Unfinished

Vary the ways that you mechanically present scenes with dialog. Variety can itself be valuable in a case. Consider starting scenes in the middle of dialog. This can be done both by just picking up the action in the middle of a conversation, or starting in the middle of a conversation and then backfilling, for example:

> "He hasn't been in today." says the hotel clerk, when I ask to speak to the hotel manager.

You can also mix things up by varying the amount of dialog you use in a given scene. Some scenes may be entirely dialog and others may be devoid of any.

Using Documents

One of the ways that the New York Noir / Casebook system tries to extend the approach pioneered by Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective is to incorporate the idea of full-sized documents, as you would find in a class cold-case / dossier game.

You should look for opportunities to let the player uncover thematically rich and/or dense full page "documents" during their investigation of a case. These document pages are normally provided in the back of the casebook, where the player may easily re-read them, or even separated into an envelope where their retrieval can create a sense of enjoyment and surprise.

Storytelling Tips

Hallie Ephron makes a convincing case that you should have an ***Adversary*** for your detective.

An adversary is ***not*** the villain. It is someone more neutral, who creates conflict with the protagonist, typically by putting obstacles in their way. In a detective story or police procedural, it is common that the boss of the detective is his adversary -- creating obstacles and restrictions that the protagonist must struggle against, because he doesn't understand the truth behind the case, or because he's corrupt, etc. An adversary creates opportunities for regular conflict, argument, struggle.

Here's a brilliant little idea: If you let your main protagonist occasionally "break the rules" by getting tough with someone, threatening someone, etc. Then you can make his boss come down on him for breaking the rules. This is a win-win. The players get the vicarious enjoyment of being the tough guy, and you get your adversary in the form of a boss who is trying to constrain him. It's actually a win-win-win because you also get the opportunity to revisit these questionable activities from a different perspective which adds dimension to them and lets you linger on them, and provide your protagonist with a way to explain their approach to a third party.

Another idea from Hallie Ephon is to give innocent characters reasons to be deceitful. Deceit creates suspicion on the part of the player that will feel satisfying and fair, and challenges the player to distinguish between looking guilty and being guilty, and challenges the player to use their knowledge of human psychology to and the facts of the case to solve the case.

New York Noir (Casebook) cases are broken into days. The start and end of days are a good place for you to exercise some control over your story and set the tone for each new act, and engage in some pure storytelling.

Hallie Ephron on Planting Good Clues

Here are some tips from Hallie Ephron's Book "Writing and Selling Your Mystery Novel":

- Emphasize the unimportant and deemphasize the clue.
- Establish a clue before the reader can grasp its significance. This is one of my favorites! There is often an opportunity to present a meaningful detail before the player has enough context to know that it's significant. And if the player does go back and re-reread the earlier and make the connection, it will feel very satisfying.
- Have your sleuth misinterpret the meaning of a clue.
- Have the clue turn out to be something that should be there but isn't (the dog that didn't bark).
- Scatter pieces of the clue in different places and mix up the logical order.
- Hide the clue in plain sight.
- Draw attention elsewhere (to distract the player, like a magician).
- Create a time problem. For example, by giving the suspect a timeline alibi that must be debunked.
- Place the real clue right before a false one (since players tend to focus on the last clue they read in a section).
- Camouflage a clue with action. For example by creating a dangerous moment right after a clue is revealed.

Ephron makes an important point worth highlighting: "Your goal is to misdirect but never to confuse." Remember this. You should not try to make a case difficult by overloading the player with details or making it hard for them to track what is happening or distinguish between characters with similar names. Doing so will result in a feeling of frustration and hopelessness on behalf of the player.

You should alm to create situations where the player can lay out the facts but cannot figure out a consistent explanation for them -- and feels that the solution is just out of grasp.

NEW YORK NOIR FORMULA CHECKLIST

Rules are meant to be broken, but here's a formulaic checklist that you could use to tune-up your case, which touches on many of the points discussed throughout this document.

Many of these operations can be thought of as "layering" operations that you might perform after you get closer to a final version, where you make a specific pass through the entire document, reading to check and layering on a specific element (like mentions of the weather).

- Do you have a captivating, long, detailed, opening scene / scene of crime?
- Does your scene of the crime (or opening scene) introduce details that defy explanation?
- Are the important characters in your case distinctively named?
- Do you have a compelling villain, with a compelling goal?
- Do you have a sidekick for your protagonist to bounce ideas off of?
- Does your protagonist have an adversary to get in her way?
- Do you have some moral/psychological choices that the player is forced to make? A good rule of thumb is one choice per day.
- Do you have some brushes with celebrities and the culture of the location? A good rule of thumb is to write one such scene per day, though they may be optional scenes the player never visits.
- Do you have hints for all required markers? Are they properly laddered, with the merest suggestion of the nature of the marker first, and escalating to outright spoiler at the end.
- Do your required markers ensure that all players will have seen the critical scenes?
- Is your case still interesting and require some deduction once players have seen all the critical scenes?
- Have you sprinkled in references to the weather and other contextual elements to make the case feel like it is set at a particular time and place? A good rule of thumb is two per day.
- Have you created variety in your scenes, in length and dialog structure. A good rule of thumb is one BIG scene per day.
- Does your case have moments of humor and levity that reflect the personality of your detective? A good rule of thumb is one funny scene per day.
- Have you added scenes that develop your protagonist's social relationships? (friendships, romances, etc.) A good rule of thumb is one such scene per day.
- Have you created some small side cases for the player to solve? A good rule of thumb is one or two side cases per case, or two side case scenes per day.
- Have you created some personality-heavy scenes with some of the protagonist's returning character contacts?
- Have you structured your case into a series of days which follow a good 3-act storytelling arc (beginning, middle, end) or (setup, confrontation, resolution).
- Do each of your days introduce some "event" that opens up new clues/leads?
- Are your questions detailed enough to test the players knowledge of the case and generate a score that separates the good player from the great player? Don't forget you

can ask the player to be the judge of how well their answer matches details.

- Have you divided up your end-case questions into Primary and Secondary questions?
- Have you written a satisfying epilogue that explains what happens in the days, weeks, months, after the case?
- Have you used newspaper articles about the case, especially court room reporting, to tell the epilogue story from a third person perspective? Have you taken the opportunity to make your epilogue a satisfying/exciting ending?
- Have you written a behind-the-scenes essay about the construction of the case?
- Have you written a full walkthrough for the case?
- Have you done a test playthrough of the case and tracked your time, to ensure each day can be played within its allocated time, and that required markers work properly?
- A good rule of thumb is to design days so that the player has enough time to visit one extra lead for every lead they need to visit to solve the case, without hitting overtime.
- Have you asked a friend to proof-read the case using a collaborative editing tool like google docs?
- Have you asked playtesters to play the case and report issues?
- Have you used Documents when you are presenting the player with information in a lead that they may want to study in detail and repeatedly, and/or which is better suited for a full page presentation? A good rule of thumb is to aim to have at least one or two documents for every day of your case.
- Do you have a list of your protagonist's quirks, flaws, drives.. Have you found places to show them off?
- Have you looked for opportunities in the introductions and endings of each day, as well as the epilogue, to underline and reinforce any characteristics and flaws of your protagonist, any relationships with sidekicks,adversaries?
- Have you used day start and end sections to do storytelling and develop your protagonist and control the pace of each act?
- Have you sprinkled elements of sound, smell, touch in scenes in addition to the typical visual senses?

CASEBOOK LANGUAGE TIPS

I plan to eventually move this section into a separate document on technical writing of cases using Casebook tools, but it's here for now.

Leave yourself comments

You can add comments in your case by starting a line with //.

Develop a system of notes while you are writing to remind you when a lead is unfinished or anything you don't want to forget.

Using $logic commands in Casebook

If you are using my Casebook language and tools to write your case, you can add commands that specify logical connections between leads, which can be used to help render a graphical plot map (mind map / flowchart) of your case:

- $logicSuggests("LEAD#")
- $logicSuggestedBy("LEAD#")

Keeping a version history

You can make a special section in your casebook file that is only rendered into a pdf when you build a debug version; here I suggest you keep a version history as you make revisions, so you can keep track of what changes you make over time. You can do this inside your case text under a section called "# REPORT" which does not get compiled into the final pdf except when doing a debug build.

Using $dayDate() function

It's not uncommon to find that you need to shift around the date of your case, and it can be tricky to keep track of what day of the week events are happening on, etc.

When writing a case using the Casebook tools, you configure each day of your case in your setup/options, and then you can refer to the day of the week whenever you need to, or have it displayed in various forms.

So for example if you have:

```
$configureDay(1, date="3/21/1944")
```

Then you could write in your case something like:

"The robbery happened on $dayDate(1, "dayOfWeek") morning."

Which would get converted to:

"The robbery happened on Tuesday morning."

The real benefit of this though, is that if you ever change the date of your case then all of your text will be adjusted automatically.

Using Fingerprints in your Cases

New York Noir has tools to facilitate the use of fingerprints in cases if you wish to do so. You may use them purely as thematic and narrative elements, or you may require the player to locate and lookup fingerprints in order to solve their case.

The file **FingerprintDirectory.pdf** contains the fingerprint information available to the player, and discusses how to classify and search for fingerprints. It is broken into two halves. In the first half, individual prints are presented, organized by classification. In the second half, full 10-finger fingerprint sets are presented.

Read the introduction in the **FingerprintDirectory.pdf** for more info on how to classify and location fingerprints.

Each fingerprint and fingerprint set is identified by a lead#. The normal way to incorporate a fingerprint mechanic in your case is to provide players with a discovered fingerprint during the course of their game, which has no associated id label. The player will then have to locate the fingerprint in the fingerprint directory (by first classifying it and then finding a matching print).

When a player does locate the fingerprint in the fingerprint directory, they will see a lead ID associated with that print. With that lead, they can find the full set of 10 fingerprints for that person in the second half of the fingerprint directory.

They will then lookup that lead# in the casebook, where you should write a scene that represents them finding the information on the owner of that fingerprint.

There are no fixed identities associated with each lead# (person) owning a fingerprint. You are free to use any fingerprint lead# with any character in your case. Just remember each lead# in the fingerprint directory is associated with 10 different fingerprints, one for each of their 10 fingers. Fingers are named from L1 to L5 and R1 to R5, for the left thumb through the right pinky, respectively. You can insert an image for a finger of your choice from a specific individual into your case using the casebook tools, or show the full set of a suspect.

See the **Foxtrot East** case for an example of a case that makes heavy use of Fingerprints.

Using Unknown Prints

The main fingerprint directory (FingerprintDirectory.pdf) which is available to the player, contains some prints with a listed lead# of "UNK###". The purpose of these entries is to let you as an author add prints in the game that CANNOT be looked up in the casebook. That is, they represent prints that may be found during play that the player may try to look up in the fingerprint directory, but are not thematically on file with the police, and so will have no entry.

The actual hidden lead#s for these individuals is listed in an auxiliary pdf (**FingerprintDirectoryUnknown.pdf**) which is intended *only* for case authors and not players.

The idea is that if you want to have prints from someone who is not on file with the police and which cannot actually be researched by the player, you should use one of the identities (lead#s) in this anonymous set.

You might naturally wonder why go through all the trouble of having a separate set of "unknown" fingerprints. Why not just pick any lead# from the main fingerprint set, and use that individuals prints in your story, and if the player identifies one of those prints, and looks up the lead # in the casebook, simply tell the player that there are no records on file for that individual?

There is a reason, and it has to do with how the FingerprintDirectory can be used to lookup the full set of prints of an individual once you have a single print.

So imagine in your case there are two prints at the scene of the crime. As the author you know that these two prints come from the same person and are of the the culprits L1 and R2 fingers. But the suspect is not supposed to be on file with the police, so the players should have no way of knowing that these two prints are from the same person.

IF you used the normal fingerprint functions to insert the L1 and R2 fingers of a single specific lead#, the players could locate one of them in the directory and then find that individual's full set of prints, and be able to determine that they are from the same person.

But by using a person from **FingerprintDirectoryUnknown.pdf** the player will not be able to do this.

Another solution might be to use random fingerprint images that are NOT EVEN PRESENT in the fingerprint directory. A downside here is that the player might spend an inordinate amount of time searching for a match and be frustrated when it cannot be found.

Yet another solution might be to use a different lead# for each print, but this has its own problem. Now instead of revealing to the player that the two prints came from the same person, you are communicating to the player that they definitely come from two different people.

That is why you should use an individual from the **FingerprintDirectoryUnknown.pdf** directory when you don't want the player to know anything about a found fingerprint other than that it is not found in the normal NYPD database of persons of interest.

Making it easier or harder for player to look up Prints

One way you can make it easier or harder for a player to find a fingerprint in the Fingerprint directory is by taking advantage of different frequencies of print types. A less common type (Tented Arch) will have fewer prints to search through. Scars also make it quite a bit easier to search for a print.

When picking a print to use for your suspect, choose one with easy or hard prints and use the fingers that are more or less unique.

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Sections to add:

- Effectively using Contacts/Allies
- Writing good scenes / characters / location descriptions
- What makes a good / fair clue?
- Features of bad / frustrating clues?
- Making good use of evidence and documents
- Advanced techniques and strategies
- Writing good side cases
- Using IRPs effectively
- Using Events effectively
- Using time effectively

Use of AI and ChatGpt

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