



## Writing Mysteries Is It a Mystery?

by Marcia Rosen

Writing a mystery book or series is akin to putting together a thousand piece puzzle. Where should you begin? Do you start with the corner and edge pieces, providing details on the main characters including the heroes and criminals? Or do you start in the middle, revealing up front the murder and complexity of the story plot?

Whether you start with corners, or center pieces, what matters is sticking with your structure and then pacing the plot. You need to keep it moving forward by creating suspense with clues and mysterious happenings.

In the television mystery series, "Columbo," the murder always took place at the beginning. The seemingly flustered but persistent detective follows various suspects and clues to eventually catch the murderer. In other TV mysteries, you follow the path of an ordinary citizen—writer, baker, doctor, librarian, or florist—who is captivated by certain events and incidentally gets involved in solving crimes. These amateurs just can't seem to help themselves, even when following the clue leads them to danger.

From these types of mysteries known as cozies, to film noir with gangsters and hard-boiled detectives, to terrifying thrillers, mysteries have long appealed to the reader and viewer. As a writer, you can choose your own style, your own way of creating characters and stories of murders and mayhem, and your own way of presenting clues and suspects leading toward solving the crime. Yet, there are certain elements essential to a good mystery, which can take the reader on a fascinating ride through a criminal's mind and the minds of those who reach into that mind to catch them.

You want readers to become involved and interested in your story so they follow the clues you leave while attempting to solve the crimes with you. Don't make it too easy: There should be numerous possible suspects. Enhance the plot with character conflict and red herrings to confuse and steer the reader away from the real murderer. The bad guy can also lead the reader astray by placing suspicion and blame on someone else.

A good mystery story includes: an intriguing plot, interesting characters (often with unique characteristics), descriptive places and locations that set a mood, interesting and controversial dialogue, clues (real and false) leading to the bad guys (and gals), and a bit of humor. Be clear about your point of view. Is it from the perspective of the main character as in Sue Grafton novels or a third person as in Raymond Chandler mysteries?

Ultimately, you want to be able to explain your characters' motivation for their criminal behavior. Common sources are anger, hate, power, money and, of course, revenge. Revealing truths, secrets and lies with stories of betrayal and vengeance with surprise endings leave your reading wanting more—especially in a series!

Although you might think it strange, I suggest you ask yourself what your motivation is for writing or wanting to write mysteries. In my series, "The Senior Sleuths," the actions of my senior characters, Dick and Dora, often reflect my truths about life and relationships.

I grew up in an unusual, and sometimes outrageous, environment. It wouldn't take a genius, a psychiatrist, or a palm reader to figure out the genesis of my fascination with crime and criminals. In "The Senior Sleuths," Zero the Bookie is a version of my dad, and several other characters are based on a few of his many associates.

Our history and experiences can define us, inspire our actions, and, as writers, impact our words and stories. Mine most definitely have. My father was a small-time gangster. Really! No doubt, thanks to my father, writing mysteries is in my DNA. 🍷

Marcia Rosen has previously published four mysteries in her "Dying to Be Beautiful" series, *The Woman's Business Therapist* and *My Memoir Workbook*. She created radio and TV talk shows, and received awards for her work with business and professional women. She lives in Carmel, California. Visit [www.theseniorsleuths.com](http://www.theseniorsleuths.com) and [www.levelbestbooks.com](http://www.levelbestbooks.com).

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