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How to Plan a Murder Mystery Party

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Fountas & Pinnell Classroom™

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How to Plan a MURDER MYSTERY PARTY

by David Neilsen · illustrated by Tambe

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A DIFFERENT KIND OF PARTY

The murder mystery genre has attracted devoted fans since the early 1800s. It is the ultimate literary puzzle, with clues, secrets, mistaken identities, and shocking surprises that challenge the reader to identify the character who committed the murder.

A murder mystery *party* takes it all to the next level. Suddenly, instead of reading a book, you're there—along with the other party guests. You're all characters in the story, *and* you're all detectives. The clues are right in front of your face. Is that black smudge on the picture frame a clue? What about the suspicious footprint? Who has something to hide? Keep your eyes and ears open. You may be the one to solve the mystery and catch the killer.

Can you identify these famous fictional detectives who have appeared in books, in movies, and on TV? Their names appear at the bottom of the page.













Sherlock Holmes (played by Benedict Cumberbatch), Scooby Doo, Inspector Clouseau (played by Peter Sellers in the movie The Pink Panther), Nancy Drew (played by Parker Stevenson and Shaun Cassidy on The Hardy Boys/Nancy Drew Mysteries), Hercule Poirot (played by Albert Shaun Cassidy on The Hardy Boys/Nancy Drew Mysteries), Hercule Poirot (played by Albert Sinney in the movie Murder on the Orient Express, by Agatha Christie)

PLANNING A MURDER MYSTERY PARTY

A murder mystery party is, first and foremost, a party. And a good party has to be planned. So if you want to have one, you need to answer questions such as these:

- Where are you holding your party?
- At what time of day or night will it be?
- Will there be food and drinks?
- · How many people will you invite?

The most important of these questions is the one that starts with *where*. A location for a murder mystery party has a few special requirements. It needs to have enough room for people to move around. It needs places to hide things, such as clues or evidence. And it needs one or two hidden nooks and crannies for people to have secret conversations.

Over the course of this book, we're going to plan a simple murder mystery party that you can hold in your own home or classroom. You can create the mystery yourself or do it with a group. It will need the basic elements of any mystery:

- a setting
- a story (including a murder)
- characters (including a victim and a murderer)
- a motive
- clues and evidence

So let's consider these elements one by one and see how each one fits into the murder mystery that will be the basis for your party.

In addition to planning the mystery, we'll also plan how the party itself will play out. There will be a lot to do both before and during the party, including preparing an important information packet for each guest. More about that later.

The Setting

The first thing we need is a setting. Don't confuse the setting with the location. The location is where the party takes place; the setting is where the *story* takes place. And don't forget that the setting doesn't include only the *where*, but also the *when* of the story.

When deciding on a setting, let your imagination run wild and don't feel limited by your actual location. A few simple decorations can help turn any room into whatever you want it to be. Hang a disco ball from the ceiling and you're suddenly at a 1970s nightclub. Wrap a couple of stuffed animals in toilet paper to turn them into mummies and you're in ancient Egypt.

There's no rule saying your murder mystery has to take place in the here and now. You can set it at any point in history, or even in the future! Popular time periods include 1920s Chicago and the gangster era, Victorian England, and ancient Rome. But the sky's the limit! How about the Wild West? Feudal Japan? On a spaceship in the year 3037?

And remember that the characters need a reason to be gathered in this particular place. Perhaps they are celebrating someone's birthday. Or maybe they're taking a cruise on an ocean liner.

"MURDER AT THE LIBRARY"

Let's set our murder mystery party in a public library at the present time. We'll call it "Murder at the Library."

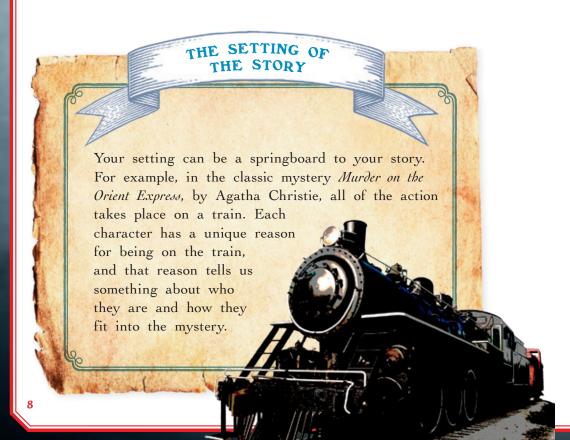


The Story

Now that you have the *where* and the *when*, you have to get down to the *what*. What is going to happen in the setting? What's the story? In other words, you need a plot.

The plot will, in some ways, depend on the setting. For example, if your setting is an ocean liner, someone could get killed by being thrown overboard. If it's a hotel or a theater, the victim is more likely to be strangled or shot. A restaurant? Poison, of course.

Another way the plot will depend on the setting is that the people involved will have to have a reason for being in the same place at the same time.



What's the Story of "Murder at the Library"?

Let's say a charity event is being held at the library. A wealthy donor named Oola Moneybags is going to announce that she's giving a ton of money to the library in order to build a new wing dedicated to books about hamsters, but before Oola can make the announcement, she's murdered!

Right off the bat, we have a reason for everyone to be in one place at the same time and we have a victim—Oola Moneybags.

Next, we'll have to think about who she is and how she's connected to everyone else.





The Characters

So who are the people at this event? In other words, who are the characters in the story? We already know who the victim is—Oola. But what do we know about her? The best victims are in a position to cause harm to multiple individuals. That's important, because it gives many characters a reason, or motive, to commit the murder.

Once you've got a victim, populate your story with related characters: family members, friends, enemies.

Don't forget to make some characters more than they seem. For example, a banker may really be a spy; a maid might be an undercover cop. (An officer of the law is always good to have around!)

The Characters in "Murder at the Library"

Our story takes place in a library, so we need some staff: Library Director Ingrid Mellowfold, Children's Librarian Reginald Bing, and Library Employee Inez Jurgerfurger.

Next, let's give poor Oola a family. There's her husband, Ned Moneybags, and their two grown children, Alicia and Jimmy Moneybags.

Charity events like this bring out lots of important and/or wealthy people, of course. These include Mayor Penny Barglewad, Dr. X. V. Dennington, cat lady Gertrude Vitty, and Police Chief Valerie Gunfiddle.

The Motive

Mystery fans want to know more than just *who* murdered the victim; they want to know *why*. Which means you need to come up with a motive.

Common motives include love, jealousy, greed, and fear of discovery.

- A jilted lover wants revenge.
- A younger sibling wants to make sure the inheritance falls to her.
- Someone wants to remove a witness to another criminal act.

Think about your victim and how she or he interacts with the other characters. Why would someone want your victim dead? Is there a large amount of money at stake? Has your victim secretly ruined the life of one or more characters? Find the motive that works for you.

The Motive Behind "Murder at the Library"

Who killed Oola Moneybags and why?

We could go with love and jealousy, and say Oola was murdered by her husband, Ned Moneybags, because he learned that Oola was planning to sue for divorce. Or perhaps Dr. X. V. Dennington is afraid that Oola has discovered that he's stealing bone marrow from his patients and selling it on the side.

For our story, let's go with Mayor Penny Barglewad. She wants to tear down the library so that she can sell the land to someone who will turn it into a bowling alley, but Oola's donation would save the library and destroy the mayor's plans. So she decides to poison Mrs. Moneybags in hopes of



Clues and Red Herrings

Your guests will need clues, so be sure to sprinkle a number of them throughout your story. Throw in some "red herrings," or fake clues, as well.

You might place physical clues here and there, like a note left inside a book lying on the coffee table. Other clues are more informational. You might let your guests know who was overheard saying something nasty about the victim.

Basically, your clues need to serve at least one of the following purposes:

- Provide direct evidence of the crime.
- Show that a suspect had access to the victim or weapon.
- Suggest a motive.
- Rule out a suspect.

The red herrings make everything more intriguing by drawing detectives off the scent. Guests have to decide if it is important that the victim's briefcase is missing or that one suspect is always sneezing.

Clues for "Murder at the Library"

We need some clues pointing to our murderer, Mayor Barglewad.

- A financial report stating that the library is losing money.
- Blueprints for Barglewad Bowling Alley.
- Someone saw the mayor dropping a tiny bottle into a trash basket.

None of these, by themselves, gives away the solution. Put them all together, however, and the picture begins to get a little clearer.

SHERLOCK HOLMES

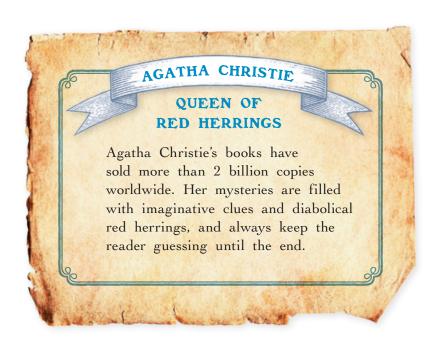
The famous detective Sherlock Holmes was created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in the late 1800s. Calling himself a "consulting detective," Holmes uses his brilliant powers of observation and deduction to solve crimes that have baffled others. Part of the wonder of Sherlock Holmes is how he learns so much from the smallest detail, like a single hair found on a coat, or a man's slight limp.

Red Herrings in "Murder at the Library"

Let's sprinkle in some red herrings to throw party guests off the track. That's part of the fun.

- Children's Librarian Reginald Bing hates hamsters.
- A copy of Oola Moneybags's will stating that she's leaving all her money to Jimmy Moneybags and none to Alicia.
- Library Employee Inez Jurgerfurger is an expert at making poisons.

Each of these red herrings casts suspicion on a character other than Mayor Barglewad, which makes our mystery that much more difficult to solve.



GETTING READY

Inviting Your Guests

You've got a great plan for your party. All that's missing are...the guests!

A week or a few days before your party, send out invitations letting people know the location and time of the party. And also let them know which character they will be playing. For example, "Hi, Jon! You're going to play Daniel Chompenstomp. He's a dentist."



Sending out your guests' character assignments ahead of time gives them a chance to put a costume together so they can come to your party in character and ready to play.



IMPORTANT TIP: Whoever plays your murder victim is going to die very early on.

Consider double-casting your victim as another character so he or she can continue to enjoy the party. Unless you think the person would rather lie on the floor for a couple of hours.

SETTING THE SCENE

As the host, arrive early to prepare. Make yourself a simple checklist. For example:

Place props/clues/red herrings.

Put out any drinks or refreshments.

Put up decorations.

Make sure you have name tags for all the characters. Guests should wear them throughout the party.

Create a list of characters for your guests.

Supply paper and pens or pencils for your guests so they can take notes.

Go over your schedule of events: When do you want your victim to die? How long do the players have to solve the crime?

Go over your checklist. Go over it again. Then sit back and wait for your guests to arrive.



DURING THE PARTY

The Murder

The day has come, your guests have arrived. It's time to stage your murder. The murder can take place in front of everyone or behind the scenes. But in front of everyone is more dramatic, so let's take that option. Possible murder methods are poison or a gun.

If you choose a gun, pick the right moment, turn out the lights, and play a sound file of a gunshot on your phone (or just yell out "Bang!"). People will get the idea. Poison is even simpler. The victim waits until he or she gets a signal from you and then proceeds to make a big fuss and drop to the floor.



The Murder in "Murder at the Library"

Mayor Barglewad poisons Oola Moneybags. This will be relatively simple to set up.

First, after everyone's arrived, Library Director Ingrid Mellowfold gathers the group together to hear Oola's big speech. Once our victim begins, wait for the right moment, then give her the signal.

She gasps! She screams! She grabs her throat! She drops onto the floor! It's a virtuoso performance!

BEHIND THE SCENES

Say you want to have the murder take place "offstage" where the guests won't witness it firsthand. Some options include:

- The victim is run over by a car (or an elephant).
- The victim is found in a closet with a dozen stab wounds on his or her body.
- The victim dies in a massive explosion everybody hears.
- Something heavy falls on the victim. A bookcase, perhaps?



The Information Packets

Immediately after your murder victim has dropped dead, hand everyone a packet. You've prepared these packets in advance, of course.

Each packet includes all of the recipient's secrets and several clues to the murder. One person's packet will contain the information that he or she is the murderer.

In addition, the packet contains a list of tasks the guest must complete. For example, he or she may have to find a particular item or need to uncover a fact that only one of the other guests would know. The key is to increase the fun by creating as many interactions among your guests as possible.



Packets for "Murder at the Library"

Each of our guest's packets will contain the information that applies to his or her character, including some tasks the character has to perform.

A few possibilities:

- Ned, Jimmy, and Alicia Moneybags need to get together for a family photo.
- Cat lady Gertrude Vitty needs to get her medication from Dr. X. V. Dennington.
- Library Director Ingrid Mellowfold has to try to collect overdue library books from Mayor Barglewad and Police Chief Valerie Gunfiddle.

Simple tasks like these will ensure that your guests move about and interact with each other, keeping them involved in the mystery...and the fun.

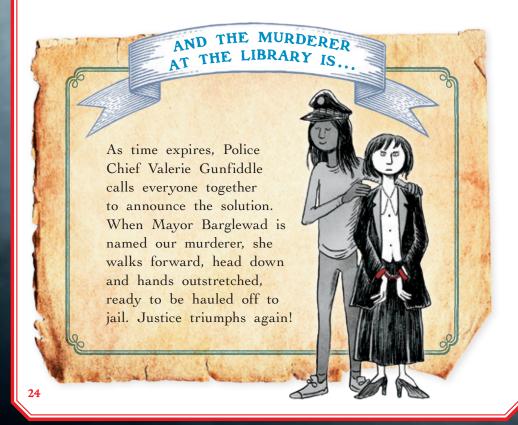


WHODUNNIT?

Your party has come to an end, and it's time to solve the crime!

If you're having people submit their guesses as to whodunnit and why, give them a five-minute warning. Then gather everyone together. If you've written out a solution, you can either read it yourself or hand it to one of the guests to read (for example, the one playing the police chief). If not, then just go ahead and tell everyone who did it, how, and why.

Then sit back, relax, and congratulate yourself on a job well done!



EVERYBODY LOVES A GOOD WHODUNNIT

I have been planning and hosting murder mystery parties for groups of all ages for a number of years. People love to put themselves into the shoes of detectives, such as Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, or Miss Marple, and try to fit all of the puzzle pieces of a mystery together. With this book, I wanted to help kids create their own mysteries and allow them to experience the joys of a "murder most foul."

—David Neilsen



PLAN THE PERFECT MYSTERY PARTY

Planning and hosting a murder mystery party is fun, easy, and a great way to learn how to make up a mystery of your own.

GR

Nonfiction: Procedural

2287 Total Running Words

Level W



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