# Writing a Mystery

Many mystery stories are written to a formula. This is particularly evident in mystery series. Detailed below are the elements contained in these mystery stories. Use the formula to write your own mystery.

| **The Detective** | • Is often a loner, or has a faithful helper who is generally not that clever. The assistant often helps the detective without knowing it  
  • Takes risks  
  • Is curious and has a job where they use this curiosity – journalist, scientist, librarian, private investigator. The detective can also be someone with plenty of time on their hands – a wealthy person, young person, retired policeman etc  
  • Has a job which allows them time and money to pursue solving crimes  
  • Is physically strong, or has very clever ways of avoiding violence  
  • Has hobbies or skills that help them solve clues – computer whiz, speaks other languages, maths or science whiz  
  • Has friends in the right places – police, government, doctor etc  
  • Has a strong sense of right and wrong  
  • Is very intelligent |
| **The Victim** | • Is always unlikeable. Don’t let the reader empathise with the victim, they must concentrate on solving the puzzle  
  • Not well known  
  • Never a child |
| **The Villain** | • Intelligent enough to commit a crime that is difficult to solve – too difficult for the police  
  • Doesn’t follow rules, or believes the rules are for other, lesser people. May know what they are doing is wrong, but does it anyway – either for their satisfaction (money etc) or to prove they are superior to everyone else.  
  • Someone with a huge ego. They pay particular attention to the way they dress, the way they act etc |
| **Clues** | • Real clues are often give very early in the story, even before the crime, when readers will miss them as they concentrate on characters etc  
  • Clues are scattered throughout the story so the detective looks like they are getting somewhere  
  • The best place to put a clue is next to a red herring |
| **Red Herrings** | • Are false clues that stand out and are believable enough to be mistaken for a real clue  
  • Should not be overused as everything must be explained to the reader at the end – and you don’t want to make the reader feel like they are not clever enough to solve the crime |
| **The setting** | • A real or imagined place – it should link to the type of crime and the detective and villain  
  • A closed environment – train, ship etc  
  • In a specialised area so that the number of possible villains is limited |