WRITING A WHODUNNIT

Best-selling crime fiction writers have reached celebrity status. Although Patricia Cornwell, Ruth Rendell and Sue Grafton are popular authors, it's good to know they had to start somewhere. Rules on writing crime novels can always be broken, but it's handy to have a few pointers.

**Writing crime stories**
The plot is the place to start. Once you have a plot or outline, create a setting and decide how many characters you need. A typical plot can be summarised in a short sentence.
For example: someone murders for revenge, worker lays false blame to get promotion, person lights fire to conceal earlier crime.
These simple plots have a crime and a motive. Now you have to decide who is the detective to solve the mystery.

**Suspects:**
To be a culprit, or the suspect, there are three qualifications.
A MOTIVE -a reason for the crime, such as jealousy, to gain power or money, to protect someone, revenge, hatred or madness.
THE MEANS -refers to the equipment, skill, knowledge or ability to commit the crime.THE OPPORTUNITY- the chance to commit the crime, such as an empty room or open safe.
Everyone in the story can be a suspect, but the reader should know that the detective did not commit the crime.
Treat all suspects equally. Ask them equal numbers of questions, make them appear equally guilty
Try not to question the guilty suspect last in your story.
You can have all suspects together in a room as your detective questions them or you can question them one at a time.
You can revisit suspects and question them more than once.
Vary the gender, age and attractiveness of your suspects. The guilty party can be nice while the innocent ones can be nasty.

**The detective:**
He or she need not be in the police force but must fit the crime.
Serious crimes need the police to investigate them.
A student can solve a case of theft at school, but not murder or a bank robbery.

**The setting:**
A setting is the place where the story happens and a time frame when the events take place.
The characters are those you would expect to find in that place at that time. A crime scene may only be part of the setting.
It saves time if you create a closed setting to limit the number of suspects. This means that everyone who was in the setting when the crime was committed is a suspect. -
Create a setting with which you are familiar: for example, school, sporting club, party, supermarket.
Make sure that your characters are not out of place.

**Clues:**
There are three kinds of clues.
KNOWLEDGE CLUES – when the culprit knows more about the crime than anyone else -why, -when, what, who, how and where
OBSERVATION CLUES - witness senses something about the culprit - sees, hears, smells, tastes, feels something.
MATERIAL CLUES - culprit leaves something behind at the crime scene (clothing, footprints).

The denouement:
This is the final unravelling of the mystery and is a continuation of the story with characters behaving as they did when we first met them.
The detective can make the denouement in various ways - by talking to himself or herself, by writing a report, or by telling someone in higher authority.

Retribution:
Retribution is punishment for wrongdoing and should fit the crime. It is not administered by the detective.
You can be vague about the punishment and suggest the proper authorities deal with it.
Too much detail about retribution means you need to know the penalties a court is likely to impose for a similar crime.

How to get started
Observe people on a train or bus. Choose an interesting-looking character and invent for him or her a name and history.
Describe one or two typical traits, such as clothing, stance or manner of speaking.
Work backwards. Work out how the crime was committed and then determine how your detective is going to solve the mystery.
Start with the motive. This way you will be able to plant the clues more effectively.

*Taken from: Learn: The Herald Sun, Tuesday December 5 2000. Author Jill Swanwick*